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THE HAPPENINGS OF JILL



THE HAPPENINGS OF JILL

By "IOTA"

Author of "A Yellow Aster" . .
"The Quaker Grandmother," etc.



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THE HAPPENINGS OF JILL

CHAPTER I

"WOUNDS must be inflicted and endured in decent silence," said Jill Devereux, her inexorable eyes upon the three Fontaines; slim, delicate-moulded slips of girls, who towered like tall white lilies high above the little brown elf of a thing who swayed their councils and controlled their persons. "Now," she proceeded, in a soft, cold tone of disbelief, "do you *ab-so-lutely* understand?"

"We do ab-so-lute-ly understand!" shrieked the three in one thin quaver. In moments of apprehension the Fontaines always shrieked together. It seemed to endue them with a strength not their own.

"Hem! That hardly sounds like it. However, come on and let's see."

The three stood forth valiantly with white faces. Under Jill's firm guidance and through much tribulation they had now for some time been acquiring the habit of courage and the repression of the emotions, and at that particular moment were being Spartans opposing Persians.

The weapons of both armies consisted of holly branches cut conscientiously to the one pattern, with all the leaves left on.

"One! Two! Three!" said Jill. "Now fall to."

Jill threw herself into a position of defence; forthwith the trio hurled itself broadcast upon her, and every atom of her bare skin, despite her neat parry and counter-attack, left

exposed to the disordered onslaught, lustily they smote; for, if the Fontaines had little science, once set going they had infinite zeal.

The present combat took place under a big chestnut-tree in the crook of the hill. Jill had selected the position as being well out of sight of every window, and flanking a grass-grown path leading nowhither. Disposed in many convenient holes amongst the gnarled roots lay hidden all the treasures of Jill.

The combatants went barefoot, and were stripped to their little scant white petticoats, with short bodices attached to the shapeless little waists and shoulders by tapes.

But there was a signal difference between the petticoats. Those of the three were of soft cambric, and wedged in between the little beautiful tucks all round the skirts were insertions of fine lace. But Jill's petticoat was of stout calico—Jill had watched it bleaching on a gooseberry-bush for many a weary week—turned up at the edge with a neat herring-bone.

Presently the holly bushes began to tell, and little trickles of blood scored Jill's brown shoulders into the likeness of Greater Britain upon the world's map for when they got a stroke in, the Fontaine brood could hit stoutly. But only a few slight blobs of scarlet defaced the waxen whiteness of the lily necks.

Jill harboured a fine contempt for her foe, and a shrinking, unwilling reverence for the sheen of white flesh, and so she hit delicately.

She was enjoying herself immensely, however. Her eyes blazed with the greed of battle, and, clear as a hawk's, searched the uttermost parts of the foe for any visible symptom of slackness.

She looked so happy and absorbed that a tall woman in rusty black, with a back of preternatural flatness and a Spanish lace scarf thrown with an odd barbaric grace across her iron-grey hair, who was marching like a grenadier to gain the covert of the great chestnut trunk, fetched up sharp in the open to look at the girl.

Like Jill's, her eyes, although peering half-blind out of their nests of wrinkles, were as keen as a brown hawk's; like Jill's also, they were grey, and, instead of the yellow light of the hawk's, they shone with the cold, glancing glimmer of steel. When she perceived the discrepancy between the attackers and the attacked, together with the little rivers of blood on the brown shoulders and the faint blobs upon the white ones, she nodded her superb head approvingly. But after a reflective survey of the slender elegance, despite their scant petticoats, of the Fontaines, she pursed her lips, gathered in her skirts, and set her back, if possible, a trifle more straight.

A sudden feeble squeal that broke from the squad caused Jill to call a halt. For an instant or so she waved her holly branch in a leisurely, unjudicial, aloof way above the trio. Then, in language obviously reserved for occasions of importance, she spoke up, slowly.

"It is not meet for me," said Jill, "to wage war with freedmen with the souls of helots and the voices of cats. Depart, therefore, and wage war amongst the dove-cots. There will you find your fittest foes. For me, I go to whet my sword on MEN."

"Jill, Jill, Jill! Try us again!" they wailed. "We'll stand it! We'll stand it! We—w-will, or d-d-die!"

"Stand what?" said Jill, in a tone of mild inquiry.

"The—the torture, t-th-agony!"

Jill permitted her eyes to rove gently over the small blurs of red upon the shrinking shoulders.

"Agony? Ere ye venture upon high-sounding words full of wind, I pray ye learn the significance of them. 'Tis only fools who utter big words blown out with emptiness. However, every creature has its uses," she resumed in a more colloquial style, and in unconscious but perfect mimicry of her interested observer behind the chestnut trunk. "For the space of three days shall ye therefore be object lessons for the chicken-livered. Staunch your blood"—her eyes mocked—"what there is of it—and resume your garments."

Now was the moment for the rebuked to score, and with

discreet and chastened glee they seized upon it. Slipping with quite surprising agility into their black silken stockings and sky-blue cambric frocks, they sat down delicately with crossed hands to watch Jill's clumsy toilet—a perennial delight, as it happened, to these gentle butterflies, although, oddly enough, until this moment Jill had been unaware of the fact. Now, however, some dawn of a woman's instinct induced her to look up and understand.

She was in the act of pulling on her own knitted stockings, home-dyed, of a screaming magenta, great darns of a lighter tone on toes and heels, Grandmother Devereux, in the matter of dye, not being particular to a shade.

The blue eyes of the band were sparkling like river forget-me-nots, and they were all smiling sweetly.

This was Jill's first direct personal traffic with pure femininity, and her primary impulse was furiously to rage. But certain peculiarities in her early training, combined with a long and conscientious practice of the Spartan cult, made her bite her tongue and consider. She then thrust out two thin little shanks to their utmost limit, and with slow, solicitous care smoothed one magenta leg after the other. Finally, with a sense of burning at the heart, she stood up and commanded the eldest Fontaine to fasten her brown stuff frock, keenly aware the while that it was held together with big yellow hooks, which grappled unblushingly, but with infrequent success, big yellow eyes, whilst the little white hooks of the Fontaine back seams were hidden decorously in blue silken eyelet holes of a most surprising perfection of neatness.

By the time the frock was hung together Jill felt that she must say something or burst. To do this effectively, retaining the while all her dignity of mien and command, seemed for the moment a difficult problem. But Jill had before this reaped certain advantages from the ordered moderation of tone impressed upon her from birth, and in historical language of mixed periods one can go far in the matter of telling abuse, yet without offence.

"Depart, O preposterous and prodigious asses!" she

murmured. "Go, O cats! Claw, spew, and disport yourselves accordin' to your kind. For Gad's sooks," she pursued softly, "save in the matter of speech ye belong to the tribe of the smaller beasts who, since they can neither roar nor devour, just spit and snarl."

Jill, finding herself falling back into the vulgar tongue, cast about rapidly for something out of a book, more or less.

"When your ways have ceased to utter your folly, then may you return to your posts," she concluded.

The Fontaines, long since arisen from their seats of judgment, were all looking at Jill's eyes, which, fixed inflexibly on a little inoffensive wart upon the tree-trunk, were scattering maledictions freely. This was Jill's way of rewarding herself for any especial effort in self-control.

The Fontaines, knowing her habits, shifted from leg to leg and were upon the point of flight, when they all of one accord paused to reflect.

The desire to squeak in peace, out of all proportion to any exciting cause, and a variety of other artless desires common to their kind, were in the marrow of the Fontaine bones, but in the memory of man no member of the tribe had ever been known to forego any pleasure, lawful or otherwise, that could by any means be snatched.

Jill was the centre and fount of all the amusement likely to be got hold of in their present dull retreat by these poor quaking waifs. Despite their tremors, therefore, still astute, to propitiate Jill appeared to be their nearest duty.

"Jill, oh, Jill—dear Jill—be nice!" wheedled the first.

"Jilliflower! Jillicums!" cooed the second.

But the third, as yet unsoiled of the world, squeaked out defiant, in a shrill treble:

"I say, Jill, don't be a beast!"

Adamant until that moment, Jill began to soften. She had shot her sheaf-full of barbed arrows into the tree-trunk, and thus relieved the tension of her feelings. And after all, to dwell permanently upon the meaner aspects of magenta stockings was low; so much depends upon the legs they

encase. And if there was one thing in the world of which Jill was quite sure, it was of her muscle, whilst that of the Fontaines, notwithstanding months of endeavour, she knew to be still batter pudding.

Jill's self-respect came flooding back upon her. Her mood, however, still called for the language of books. But as a symptom of restored equanimity, this time she sought the Scriptures for a portion of her inspiration.

"Disperse, O Spartan freedmen, to your homes," she chanted melodiously. "Remember your vows; purge your earthly desires; keep from high looks and proud stomachs, especially you, Cœlia."

Cœlia stared and looked down with plaintive deprecation at her slim formlessness. Jill's eyes raked the horizon amiably.

"Remember that angels carried Lazarus into Abraham's bosom, rags an' all. But the dogs licked up the blood of Jezebel in her best clothes."

With a perplexed frown, but a grim smile, the lady behind the tree took advantage of Jill's back being turned, and went as quietly as she had come. The next instant the big yard clock of Knockeen boomed out the quarter to four, and Jill, with a parting admonition to her band to strengthen its backbone and remember Lot's wife, was off like a deer to the house. She went by a short cut and thus knew nothing at all of her late visitor.

Four was the hour set aside for the preparation of lessons. Lessons of quality such as Jill's came in amongst the other irrational tyrannies of life, to be endured under protest. Punctuality, on the contrary, was a Spartan virtue, rigorously respected of Jill.

To the Fontaines, reared in softer traditions, such slavish obedience, save in the teeth of any imminent active force, savoured of a mean mind. The feebleness apparent in Jill's haste enabled them with a lighter heart even than usual to cast off the trammelling sense of her power, and their momentary hankering after muscle and the higher life yielded insensibly to the deeper desire to loll.

They shirked their lessons gaily, forgot their backbones, and at tea ate a great many more hot cakes than they could quite conveniently grapple with.

It was these lapses upon the part of her squad which so frequently drove Jill to the Scriptures for fitting exhortation, and had suggested to her vigorous mind the inception of the Spartan game.

She had started it early in the preceding winter by a series of preliminary exercises designed to fit her future phalanx for its high calling. The training had perforce to be conducted entirely out of doors. Grandmother Devereux permitted no rampaging in and out of vagrant visitors—"their eyes on sticks"—in her household.

Her social intercourse was established upon a sound and unshifting basis, and consisted in solemn occasions when at stated intervals she dispensed bountiful hospitality to the mainland, and in her beautiful ordered voice, and with her fine manner, uttered many a home truth; also when upon subsequent occasions she sat in her great barren drawing-room to receive the resulting calls of state.

The mainland comprised the few scattered families who lived in battered state in the big old houses across the bleak tumbling waters which cut the little island off from the great world. The visits of these ladies and their resigned escorts depended upon wind and tide, and could in no sort of way take one unawares, since the boats that brought them were visible two miles from land, and left ample time in which to beat eggs for the scones and get out the larger silver service.

The Fontaines were Jill's first friends from "Beyond," the child's name for that nameless paradise wherein people enjoyed themselves. To land them sheer in her home was her first impulse of hospitality, and she fairly panted with it, for Jill, in spite of her soft voice, took her emotions violently.

The order of exclusion therefore rankled sorely in her heart; in contained silence, however, for there was that in her grandmother's eyes when she issued it which precluded argument. But Jill was now firmly convinced in her own mind that the

furtive rumours rife in the island to the effect that after generations of the open hand there reigned at last at Knockeen a miser were only too bitterly true. And whenever this shameful secret came uppermost in Jill's thoughts, she grew burning hot all over, and her cheeks pricked with pain.

For full and sufficient reasons, just about this time the Fontaines were also debarred from keeping open house. The Fontaine mamma was absorbed in affairs and frequently absent, and during these times of relaxation the servants preferred the house to themselves. They were always glad, however, to get quit of their charges. Jill therefore had a free hand in the training of her squad.

Her plan of campaign was coherent and built upon a basis of pure reason, having direct regard to the abject terror in the face of the elements betrayed by the embryo Spartans. To correct this, Jill felt that a heroic thoroughness must characterise the most initial even of her measures.

At the first fall of snow, having conducted her band therefore to a convenient distance from prying eyes, she waved them to a fence, commanded their instant removal of shoes and stockings, and led the twittering trio a vigorous point-to-point race across the snow-mantled hills, opposing to ear-piercing protest naught save the unconquerable suavity of silence. Failing snow, throughout all that stricken winter there raged the Covert Exercise—a fearsome manœuvre entailing many discomforts. Barefoot, with jackets across their arms, boots and stockings slung securely round their necks, the unhappy three limped piteously at the heels of their prancing leader sheer through the furze covert.

The soft pink feet made pin-cushions for the little yellow prickles strewn thick on the ground. Their legs and arms were flicked by the vigorous youth in the green twigs; the boots, in the convulsive writhings of the little lank bodies, were sent banging unrhythmically against each heaving chest.

Notwithstanding the fact that Jill always went first in order to clear the course, to stamp down the yellow prickles and push aside the more vicious of the branches, it is yet hardly

to be wondered at that the Fontaines occasionally howled like dogs, and set Jill reflecting audibly.

Although they fell short of her somewhat high standard, however, Jill's sense of justice forced her to make allowances for weaker vessels; so she beat down the stinging carpet more industriously than before, and patiently extracted all their thorns.

It was in the periods of repose, when her eye was necessarily off them, that the Fontaines neglected their muscles and wallowed in the flesh-pots. Here was the one weak spot in Jill's system, and it increased materially her grudge against her grandmother's niggardly exclusiveness. It interfered so fatally with her sphere of influence. A home to which you could bring people seemed to Jill's hankering imagination one of the most abounding delights of the "Beyond."

CHAPTER II

"OH! oh! oh!" said Jill. "Oh, the dulness of everything!"

It had been a most unproductive day. Her morning governess being, because of some recent interpretation of prophecy, more than usually depressed, and, needing a brain-rest, insisted upon her pupil's revising work she could have shouted from the house-tops without a letter astray. The Fontaines for some incomprehensible reason had failed to keep their tryst.

Jill threw a selection of the best French authors behind a myrtle bush and yawned. Then she strolled to the wide casement window to look at Grandmother Devereux cleaning the drawing-room carpet. For three stricken hours now had Mrs. Devereux been on her creaking knees steadily working up and down those endless green breadths of worn pile.

When two generations ago she had come back from her honeymoon, the pile had been as soft and deep as moss, and of the soft yellow green of the velvet clumps one finds tucked away in mountain rocks or out on the moors beside the little

pools. And scattered all over it there were pink moss rosebuds all tied up with blue true-lovers' knots.

Nat Devereux had chosen the carpet because green was the favourite colour of Elinor Drake, and a moss rosebud her favourite flower. The blue true-lovers' knots had been but a providential coincidence. When Nat caught sight of them in the dim old warehouse down by the brown river, he had blushed scarlet, and swaggered off to inspect a fine ormolu cabinet; for being a fair man and standing six foot two in his stockings, in any matter of sentiment Nat was as sensitive as a boy. But he came back later and bought the carpet. Now, like the head of its mistress, it was hoary as silver lichen, and the rose in the buds fairly matched the faint flush in her cheeks. But the blue in the true-lovers' knots was precisely what it had been upon the day when Nat had brought the carpet home. It had borne the burthen of the years gallantly, and never grown fainter. This, considering the fleeting quality in blue, was next door to a miracle, and a secret and abiding consolation to Mrs. Devereux.

Her soul, however, abhorred carpet cleaning and whenever she set forth upon a loathed task it was her inviolable custom by dint of repeating the Psalms for the day to keep her spirit purged. But by the time she had got half-way up the first vast breadth of faded green, old memories of those who had trodden out their little lives of frowning sorrows and smiling joys across the roses and the true-lovers' knots became all-sufficient chasteners for this tireless spirit, and she clean forgot the Psalms—though indeed, as it happened, they were brave ones that day and full of wrath.

Jill, however, naturally could know nothing of her grandmother's sources of discipline. All she saw was an uplifted stiff old face and two silent eyes, behind which there lay hidden a multitude of mysteries, quietly regarding her. The searching glance in some inexplicable way added materially to the dulness of life. And yet the serene magnificence with which Mrs. Devereux rose to her feet to look down upon her handiwork caused Jill to hold her own head higher.

Things in general were, however, so flat that she was just on the point of going to look for Fred Morton—and things must indeed have been pretty bad with Jill before she would trouble to seek out Fred—when her grandmother called her.

"Have you learnt your lessons, Jill?"

"I've gone over them. There was nothing to learn."

"Hem!"

Jill writhed and stood on one leg. Grandmother Devereux could say in a cough more than any one else in a page of sentences. But once started, Jill was not to be deterred from continuing the conversation.

"Couldn't I have some book that goes on—that leads to something? Snips out of books only aggravate you."

"You probably mean exasperate. I have no doubt they exasperate your teacher."

Jill stood down firmly on both legs, and for a moment looked surprisingly like her grandmother.

"No. As it happens I always know the stuff, and Miss Le Cam enjoys monotony."

"You've done the other things?"

"Hours ago."

Mrs. Devereux stifled a sigh that escaped Jill's ears, but she perceived clearly enough the ominous glitter in the lady's eyes. For a second she struggled against a sense of powerlessness, which often beset her when her grandmother's eyes assumed this aspect. Then she hardened her mouth and swung round.

"I believe you're tired," she said accusingly. "Shall I finish that carpet?"

"Certainly not."

"But why?"

"I can't put up with blotched hands or curved spines about any house of mine."

Notwithstanding the pointed definiteness in her utterances there was a curious aloof preoccupation in the manner and tone of Mrs. Devereux. The attitude hampered conversation enormously. Jill sighed with irritation, but she pushed on.

"*Your* hands are white enough, and just look at your back!"

"I have the sense to know what is due to myself. I don't stoop, and I do wear gloves. I have some self-respect."

Jill squared her shoulders.

"I have some self-respect too."

"I'm extremely glad to hear it. Keep it; that's all I can say."

"If the carpet must be cleaned, couldn't the servants clean it?"

"One has rheumatism, and the other is seventy."

"You——" Here Jill fetched up sharp.

In spite of her preoccupation, Mrs. Devereux laughed.

"You did well to stop. The cases, however, are hardly comparable. *We* can do what *they* can't."

Jill wriggled under a weight of memories.

"Yes," she burst out nervously; "we can do all the horrid things, and do without wine when we're sick."

"At least we do the horrid things well, and we invariably hold our tongues about the wine."

Jill's eyes flashed a mute revolt. Her grandmother knelt down again, and proceeded calmly with her scouring.

The silences of Mrs. Devereux made Jill feel like a fly in a net, and frequently forced her into unwary speech.

"I don't believe Jerry'll even know the carpet's been cleaned."

Mrs. Devereux's hand gave a little jump upon the brush, and of a sudden her voice lost all its quality.

"That, Jill, is quite likely," said she; and, for some odd reason or other, Jill felt just as she had once done when by a horrid mischance she had trodden on a young bird and heard it crunch. Grandmother Devereux had sometimes the most unpleasant effects upon Jill.

When next her grandmother spoke, the child was still thinking this matter over.

"You said something about self-respect just now, Jill. I could wish to see it more apparent in your own conduct. I

told you, if I remember aright, to keep away from the Fontaine children."

"You didn't *tell* me," said Jill hastily.

The failing sight of "th' ould missus" had been making conversation these three months upon the island, but now one grim, comical upward flash from out them sent Jill scarlet.

"Ah, you understand."

Mrs. Devereux's methods of bringing home sin tried the reins, but it was something, at least, to have gained all her attention. Jill felt warm again, and eager with interested anxiety.

"Did you make the girls also understand?" she inquired.

"No. I've been calling on their mother."

"Oh!" Jill drew in a courageous breath. "Grandmother Devereux! Why?"

"I don't wish you to mix with the Fontaine children, Jill, because their mother, to my mind, has disgraced herself. In the eyes of a more lenient world she is, I believe, only upon the point of doing so."

"But how?"

There was resolution in Jill's tone, but her knees were shaking. Mrs. Devereux was fully aware of both states, but, being a just woman, she yielded gracefully to the voice. Besides, in the face of honest inquiry, she disdained subterfuge.

"Because, Jill, she is married to a good man whose love she has forfeited, whose honour she has"—Mrs. Devereux paused conscientiously—"she has presumably betrayed. She is now waiting, I can only infer, until her husband can make fresh arrangements and resume his children, to go away with this other person."

Jill thought hard for a minute.

"That's low," she said with decision.

Mrs. Devereux rubbed out a stain slowly.

"It has always struck me in that light."

"Very much the same as David and the Hittite's wife."

"Save that we're led to suppose David's to have been an unpremeditated fall, of which he most bitterly repented."

"Perhaps Mrs. Fontaine may bitterly repent, too," said Jill eagerly. She liked stories with some hope in them.

"I have no doubt whatsoever that she will, but not after David's fashion."

"Do you know Mrs. Fontaine well, grandmother?"

"I do, Jill. I know her to the marrow of her bones. A woman singularly unlike David. Since she was ten years old always in travail with the fit of some gown."

"It must be very nice, though, when your frocks do fit," said Jill, with a reflective sigh.

"It does possibly enter into the amenities of life," said Mrs. Devereux temperately, "in a balanced mind. It's when the thing takes possession of a fool that it leads to destruction. Were I you, Jill, I should steer clear of this possession."

"I'm not a fool," said Jill firmly.

Her grandmother turned quietly to look at her.

"No; but it's in you to be more foolish than any fool. It takes a peck of wisdom to make a pound of folly act."

Jill wriggled restively, but she liked to thresh out all questions in detail.

"Did you ever *say things* to Mrs. Fontaine?"

"Yes, Jill, I have said many things to Mrs. Fontaine. I have done my duty by Mrs. Fontaine thoroughly."

A queer look of compassion flickered about Jill's mouth, and the instant after a grim twinkle was hidden discreetly by the wrinkled eyelids of her grandmother.

"But the children haven't betrayed any one," insisted Jill, still feeling after some light in the darkness.

"They must suffer all the same. There's no escaping from the sins of the fathers—none."

Jill paused to pass in mental review a family record which comprised a multitude of kindly gentlemen who mostly drank hard. In the swift vivid way in which the little landmarks of her short existence invariably sprang to life directly she called them up, Jill could now see quite distinctly the jovial red cheeks of cousins John and George, and Hammersly and [illegible]erysse, and their monstrous girth as they rolled gaily towards

the sideboard. They had apparently always been rolling in that direction, and always gaily; and her grandmother's silent eyes had as invariably reflectively been pursuing them.

Jill glanced furtively into a mirror and with both hands took the dimensions of her slim curveless body. Her sense of balance forbade her utterly to despair.

"Sometimes the sins of our fathers may skip us," she suggested hopefully.

Grandmother Devereux was now patiently engaged upon a true-lovers' knot. She paused, and the voice with which she spoke her inexorable "Never!" was as sweet as lavender.

"Then we can be happy in spite of them. The Fontaine children enjoy themselves frightfully."

"Enjoyment, Jill, is not the whole end of life."

"Oh, but it's the whole beginning!" cried Jill sharply, with flaming cheeks.

"God help you, Jill!" said her grandmother, in an unmoved tone. Upon this ultimatum Jill thought it best to go.

When she had gone, Mrs. Devereux sat bolt upright on the floor to wonder if in the girl's rank heresy there did not after all lurk a brilliant spark of truth.

Presently, with a grim twist of pain about her mouth, she got back again to her aching knees and went on with her scouring. But she was frowning now and thinking of herself, and herself was a subject which, as a rule, Mrs. Devereux took care to avoid.

Meanwhile Jill, tingling with stored energy, set forth to find something to which to misapply it. There was really no mischief afoot sufficiently interesting to engage her attention, and Jill had a mind above unproductive iniquity—mischief for mischief's sake. She liked it merely as a means to an end, a solace to the road. The only earthly thing left her to do was to attempt something which so far Fred had failed to accomplish.

When there was no one else to beat, she could often extract a little mild excitement in beating Fred off his own bat. Accordingly, at imminent risk to her neck, slowly and

laboriously, did Jill climb by a rickety pipe to the top of a high turret tower, across two gables to a certain old chimney wherein some families of jackdaws and two white owls nested, and for corroborative evidence took an egg from a deserted jackdaw's nest. Being in an advanced state of decomposition she carried it gingerly between her teeth back across the gables and down the tower, then exhilarated with success, and hankering after an audience, she went briskly down the avenue to pause for a minute with hungry eyes just at the point where the Fontaine chimneys first came in sight.

In the interest of conversation and climbing, Jill until this moment had hardly realised the full extent of her loss. But now it fell upon her like a blow. She felt bitter to her very heart and sore all over, and suddenly a forlorn flicker of blue on a neglected terrace seemed to her ardent imagination a mute cry for help. Jill was profoundly moved. Rebellion and resolve flashed from her eyes, and she made like a hare for the signal. But before she had crossed one field the usual things began to happen, the things she had been trying to evade and overcome ever since she was born.

First of all, texts mainly about judgments began fairly to pelt her. Then a queer sense took possession of her. It was a sense as of some abominable presence hanging around her, actually weighing upon her heels, so that in spite of all her efforts, now, as always, she was forced to stop and stand up square to her unseen adversary. The fact of not seeing him was nothing. She could feel him all about her and over her, and she sniffed sulphur. And his arguments—they were loud enough in all conscience. They pierced her ears and they were magnificent, while the feebleness of her own replies, whenever she harked back to the situation, could make her hot in January. It was quite as much wrath at her own ineffectiveness, set against the invincible resources of her foe, as natural rectitude, that in the end generally gave Jill the victory. And that upon these occasions she had an actual face-to-face struggle with the Evil One himself, Jill had never any doubt whatsoever. Such an encounter left her shaken

sometimes for half a day, but her next move, directly she felt better, was to reconcile her change of front, in spite of the superior logic of the Enemy, to her reason. In the present instance this was less difficult than usual.

The loss of the Fontaines was unutterable, but since her grandmother had had the decency to explain matters sensibly, at all costs she must obey. Even in the matter of conduct it was obviously necessary to maintain her supremacy over the Fontaines, to whom honour, in its finer shades, was a sealed book.

Jill sniffed disdainfully at their bleak slate roof, and marched proudly on to fall back, if only she could find him, upon the inevitable Fred.

There was a curious hush over the island that evening in May. No breath stirred, save now and then when a little strangled sigh broke away from the leash of the winds hovered and held. Even the little waves at the foot of the hill, instead of swaggering up to torment the weary rocks, made an innocent, feathery fringe about their tired feet, singing songs softly. The faint chirpings and cooings of the birds floated in harmoniously with the sighings of the imprisoned air, only to make the silence the more profound. And almost in the centre and on the summit of the tallest of the rocky hills that ran right and left through the island a little wilderness of graves stood out white against the sky.

It might have been a midsummer's night for the brooding stillness of the hour.

Jill hated silence; it reminded her of her grandmother, and had the same baffling effect. She peered into the still gloom of the beechwood, and then skirted furtively round it. But no sooner was she safe out in the open at the other side than she sneaked back again, and plunged sheer through the thick blackness of the tangled brush.

She was panting when she reached the light, and her brown cheeks were grey; for she had lately had rather a trying encounter, and that wood held grisly horrors known only to little Jill.

"Now that's the beastliness of funking," she thought scornfully. "If any of 'em saw me go back and do it, he'd think 'twas because I funked what *he'd* say. As if I cared! Fred'll know, anyway. Then Fred's a fool, and thinks you'll always do the straight thing in the end, in spite of you. As if any one could—always."

She was out now upon a stretch of heath, "where the winds sweep and the plovers cry," but this, with all the rest, was caught in the vile grip of the silence.

Jill stopped short upon a breezeless knoll, drank in the stillness with a great gulp, and, shaking with unspeakable fear, plumped down and set her ear to the ground, while two fine quivering nostrils belied oddly the mockery of her clear, hard eyes.

A boy with an old book under his eager nose and his senses in the clouds was waked to life by Jill's thud upon the crisp moor. After one rapid glance he crouched down again behind his whin; and, although bursting with curiosity, he looked rigorously away from her.

"Listening for the end of the world and hell—that's what she's after," said Fred reflectively. "Beastly horrid that, for Jill. Wonder who invented hell?"

Fred was of a speculative turn, and already dabbled with prying mind amongst the mysteries. Jill's religion, on the contrary, as we have seen, reeked of pure brimstone, unrelieved by the presence of one beneficent doubt.

When at last she arose from her investigations, with tempered haste Jill headed for home. Whereupon Fred, wriggling nimbly out of his hole, crawled on all fours to the bottom of the hill, dodged round the wood, and was dawdling abstractedly along the fence, just as Jill was catching her breath before her final plunge into the wood, now like a great black tomb gaping at her feet.

"Been prowling?" said Fred.

After one rapid glance at him, Jill swaggered on.

"No; been climbing the turret tower."

"Jill, I wish you wouldn't!"

"Dear me! If you're afraid, that's no reason I should be. Perhaps you think I didn't. Look!"

She waved the egg under his nose. Being slightly cracked, it now leaked unpleasantly. Fred sniffed angrily.

"I'd have believed you without that."

They were already in the shadows, and, in spite of itself, Jill's heart began to soften towards Fred. In the darkness with ghosts about; upon those awful anniversaries when Grandmother Devereux shut herself in her room during the day, and in the evening they all sat, full of vague dread intimately connected with graves, around the table, garnished with the best silver and next to nothing on it, and drank to the memory of "a kindly gentleman"; when she was possessed of the hankerings which made her bones ache to escape from the island—in all these seasons Fred became indispensable to Jill. Fred's significance, in short, varied in direct ratio to the amount of terror in solution in the air. Now she huddled close up to him.

"It's been a most unpleasant day," said Jill. "She's been scouring the carpet and thinking of the dead, and the Fontaines are cut off permanently on account of the sins of the fathers."

There was that in the light and subject which emboldened Fred to put his arm around Jill's waist and inclined Jill to disregard its presence there.

"She has such a number of dead to think of!" said Fred sympathetically.

"If I'd had thirteen children," said Jill solemnly, "I'd never smile again."

"There were six of 'em babies," said Fred, with a view to console.

"M'yes; it's only the men that count with Grandmother Devereux. Seven, and all six feet two-and-a-half. Count it up, Fred."

Fred stared helplessly.

"Count it up, do," she repeated impatiently. "Make some use of your mathematics."

"Count what up?" said Fred stupidly.

"The number of feet, of course, goose."

Fred still peered, but he did the sum.

"Forty odd feet of graves? Dear me! And the sins of all that lot to be making some one miserable! It's not fair play. I'm glad I'm only on the outskirts of the family; and you may be truly thankful you're just shivering on the brink, and have a saint or so hanging on to the other side of your family tree. Grandmother Devereux said so."

Fred blushed horribly.

"I'm jolly sure she said nothing of the sort."

"Any one would think you were ashamed. Why, it's a thing to be extremely thankful for; it'll save you no end of trouble. There's nothing of the kind about me, I'm sorry to say. And as for Jerry, ask Larry Glasheen about *his* ancestors. They were extremely interesting, certainly, but Larry says they'd make your hair rise. As far as I can see, it's Jerry'll have that forty feet of sins—and more, a lot—his ancestors unfortunately stretch back to untold ages—always tumbling about his ears. It's an unfair allowance for any one—and for Jerry of all people in the world!"

"I thought you liked him most awfully?"

Fred held his breath tight.

"So I do."

"Oh!"

"Oh, I couldn't explain it to you," said Jill airily. "You gulp down the whole of a person, or else just spit him out in a mouthful. Now I pick out the bits I like and blot out the rest, unless it's funny, you know, or keeps you expecting—and I'll say for Jerry he always does keep you expecting. Whenever Jerry gets into any new scrapes," she pursued reflectively, "from this minute I'll be rather sorry for him, and perhaps I might give him a hand out. I'll see."

Fred looked haughty.

"When fellows get themselves into scrapes, they ought to get themselves out without hanging on to girls."

"It's the sign of a cramped intellect to pretend to be above girls. Grandmother Devereux said—something like it."

"You certainly like helping things," mused Fred. "You were awfully good to the sick hedgehog."

"Jerry," she snapped, "isn't an atom like a sick hedgehog?"

"No," admitted Fred, in a depressed tone.

His voice annoyed Jill, but now the darkness was fairly black, so she snuggled closer, and Fred blessed the gloom for swallowing his blushes.

"I say, Fred," she cooed, "do you ever bother about the oh—you know—the last day or hell?"

"No," said Fred stolidly; "it's all rot—at least in a way," he added more diffidently. "I haven't time, anyway."

"Ho! now that's what comes of having crowds of things to learn. Somehow, if you have too much time, hell and—things will keep clattering in. It's this island, maybe," she added apologetically, "and the graves, and—and you know the sounds under the earth—and Jally—that spirit you know, in the wind, and plenty besides." Of a sudden, Jill faltered off into vagueness.

"Crumbs! are all *these* on again?" said Fred, awe-stricken.

"They were never off that I know of. Never mind. Nothing'll make you understand."

"Oh!" he stammered doubtfully.

Jill was shaking on his arm; but with the light quite close now, he had to be very careful with her. All he could do was to slow his paces artfully, and hold her just one little bit tighter. He writhed with suppressed and sympathetic understanding, but he had no words.

The next instant they were out in the soft glow of the evening. Jill threw up her proud head and pulled her waist out of Fred's clutches.

"I'm thinking of being an atheist," she remarked serenely; "and then there's nothing in the whole wide world I'll be afraid of."

"That'd be funking. And wouldn't Grandmother Devereux stare? She hates skunks. Give a thing up because it's a bit of a grind!"

"All very well for you! You called hell rot just now."

"Some people say there isn't any hell or devil at all."

"Now it's you who's being an atheist."

"It's nothing of the sort."

"It's the thin edge of the wedge, then," said Jill firmly. "I wish," she added wistfully—"I wish I was a Chinaman. If a Chinaman's god doesn't go straight, he discharges him and gets another. We're as cramped in our ways as—as the island."

Fred stood stock still to think.

"There's something in that Chinaman notion," he pronounced oracularly, then waited discreetly for the spur of Jill's curiosity.

"Dear me," said Jill hopefully, "I'm beginning to think that there might be something after all in a mathematical mind besides sums. Go-ahead, Fred, do!"

Encouraged at being accredited with anything, Fred unfolded his dim theory modestly.

"It's like this, you know. It's like an air with variations. The air is there always; the foundation and beginning and end of everything, but any fool can make variations. It's like that with God. There He is the same always, not a note astray, but there are thousands of variations, half of 'em good for nothing, always jangling round Him——"

"And He always gets lost in 'em, like the tune," said Jill, with cold disapproval.

"Make your own variations, then. That's the thing to do," counselled Fred, looking red and nervous; it seemed such a queer thing for a fellow to be jawing about.

Jill was holding her head high and appeared to have forgotten the potentialities of the mathematical mind.

"You're using Grandmother Devereux's variations now," he added, in a hurried voice; "and there are too many graves in 'em for girls."

Jill felt nearly as uncomfortable as Fred. All very well in the dark, but now the sunset was blazing in their faces. Suddenly she gave a jump.

"Good gracious!" she cried, "if that isn't Jerry on the fence."

CHAPTER III

"JERRY? And where's his uniform?"

Jill's eyes were starting out of her head. Her voice snapped like a pistol-shot.

"In his box, I suppose," said Fred densely.

"Not one telegram! They generally pour. And why isn't he shouting?"

"You look—green," said Fred, alarmed.

"Haven't you any wits at all? Can't you see that it's a simply awful scrape this time?"

The boy on the fence wriggled in a disconsolate sort of way, and turned a handsome, hurt, protesting face towards the house longingly. At that moment he saw Jill.

He dropped nimbly from his perch, ran and caught her hands. She shook them off with an odd gesture of repulsion.

"I've been waiting for you these two hours," said he, his voice faltering.

"Say it all out," she commanded, "as hard as ever you can. You needn't put it nicely. It's only us."

She dropped down on the bank, and although her whole small face was twitching, there was yet a certain air about Jill.

Jerry threw up his offended head and half turned; then he paused, flushing miserably, and faced round upon the waiting two, now both trying hard to breathe properly, and look as though nothing very particular were happening.

"Go on," said Jill.

"I've been chucked."

"Dear me. We knew that. For what?"

Jerry jerked his head like a shying colt, his feet shifted nervously. But Jill's steady eyes kept him fixed.

"I had to take the men out," said Jerry, in little jumpy sentences. "Some of them scooted and got drunk. They were the decentest chaps on the ship. I tried to keep it dark.

The skipper got wind of it, I suppose. There was a shindy, and I got my walking papers. That's all. It's brutal unfair. There was nothing disgraceful."

"It wasn't important enough to be disgraceful," said Jill, the sweet murmuring quality back again in her voice. She stood up straight and stared at the heavens. "They did quite right. This isn't the first time. There've been other things, and England was never made by fools."

"I wouldn't hit a chap when he's down," muttered Fred angrily.

Jill dropped her eyes and looked calmly past him at Jerry.

"Wait till I hit you when you're down before you speak, and at least talk sense. It isn't Jerry who's down, it's us. It's Grandmother Devereux and you and me. Jerry's like a Jack-in-the-box; he'll be up again before any of us can say Jack Robinson. He's the last hope of the family, and look at him. A—a—plucked goose that might have been an admiral."

Jerry could only make a horrid little noise in his throat. But Fred spoke up.

"It wasn't an hour ago when you said you'd be always glad to give Jerry a leg up——."

Jill snorted.

"For scrapes. Goodness me, yes! Jerry's cut out for scrapes. Between sins of the fathers and—other things —he's not accountable. But to be a common ass!" She drew a long breath, and threw her arms out. "To have the whole wide world to stretch yourself in, and then come scrambling home to your coop. O-o-oh!"

Fred's beautiful head had fallen upon his breast. His eyes were swimming.

"Can't girls ever hold their tongues," said Fred, in despair. "Jill, what possible use are words?"

"It's done," muttered Jerry. "And it's I who'll suffer."

"You! You wouldn't know how."

Jerry winced wretchedly. Jill paused and looked at him, and before proceeding further she bit her tongue and strove after reticence.

"And indeed, Fred, you're right," she said softly. "Words aren't of much use. I'd want a thousand languages to say all I think in; and by the time I'd said it Jerry'd be laughing. We may as well come home."

Once again Jerry jerked his head spasmodically and shifted to one side. But the minute after he followed Jill, and the three went silently in through the wide gates, past the empty lodge, up under the great wych elms, along the grass-grown avenue, and Jill was the only one of the three who walked with her head well up, and her back like an arrow. With trouble in the air, Jill, like her grandmother, always walked straight. And this was the sorest trouble that in Jill's memory had ever yet come to the little island.

When they reached the first turn, Jill fetched up.

"I'll tell grandmother," she said.

In his immense relief Jerry had not the wit to stifle his sigh. Jill snapped her teeth upon words, but her eyes flung daggers at him. Fred's head shot up in the air.

"Better let a chap tell himself," he growled thunderously.

Reticence was all very well, but this was too much for Jill. Her eyes wandered impersonally from Fred to Jerry.

"D'you think it's a 'chap' that troubles me," she inquired mildly. "Dear me, can't you see that this is worse than the graves all rolled together. You can't help graves. But when so much depends on you, to act like a born fool when you're not one! Why, the very sight of Jerry'd be enough to turn Grandmother Devereux inside out. She'd say every mortal thing she's been holding in since we were born. She'd never forgive herself—never! It might be the death of her. If one of the family must disgrace himself, there's no reason they all should. If I tell her she'll have time to consider, and say just as much as she wants to. Where did you get that suit, Jerry?"

"Father gave it to me."

"That's plain enough now one looks at you. Why didn't *he* tell Grandmother Devereux, then?"

"He said *I'd* better do it."

"Oh, did he? And did he smile and show every one of his white teeth?"

Unconsciously Jill thinned her own round lips into a smile of aged and infinite cynicism. But at this Jerry threw up his head and with every feature defied her sullenly.

"Oh, he did then?" she observed calmly. Her eyes passed him gingerly by and looked out into the distance. "I can see him! And then he sent you to the Tower," she pursued, and in spite of her, in the spell of her subject, her eyes flamed with excitement, "an' the theatres, an' Westminster Abbey, an' the Alhambra? I dare say he gave you evening clothes. Oh, an' then he sent you back to this miserable island to tell us."

The two people that Jerry loved best in the whole world were Jill and his father. And now he was ashamed of his father, and Jill was ashamed of him.

His dismissal from the Navy had been a crushing blow to the lad. He loved his profession and the taste of the newness of all things was yet fresh upon his palate; he was still caught up in the glory of the size of them. To be thrown headlong from this paradise had shocked and benumbed him. But he was adored of his kind; and its sympathy and his own sense of an unjust martyrdom had combined to lift him from the depths and set him vaguely afloat again.

The cynicism apparent in his father's acceptance of the situation had stung him further back into life, while Jill's list of delights, wherein possibly Westminster Abbey did *not* figure, had also its undoubted effect.

This, therefore, was Jerry's first true moment of humiliation, his first awakening to the horror of fact, his first agonising traffic with supreme failure. He thrust his head forward like a shocked beast and groped in the light of day.

Fred fetched one look at him and fled. He had been as proud of Jerry's triumphant swagger, his uniform, his fine command of nautical phrase, his boundless horizon and illimitable potentialities, his fine freedom from prejudice, and store of professional anecdote as Jill herself. And

whatever "another chap" may have done doesn't after all prevent him from being "another chap." At the same time the horror in Jill's eyes, the pitilessness in her low voice, filled him with a furious envy of Jerry.

All these warring elements appeared to be shaking themselves up in Fred and swelling until his body seemed too small to hold them and frightfully hot. All the way up the drive he had been slouching along on tiptoe, as though he were treading on eggs, and in his torment he had held his breath tight.

But to see Jerry—Jerry the unreachable, the invulnerable, with his head thrust out before him like a wounded brute, was the last stroke. Fred laid heel to ground and fled.

By the time he reached the covert of the decaying glass-houses his points of view had undergone a complete revolution; all the foundations of his solid, stolid earth creaked and groaned. The Book of Revelation, a volume used unsparingly by Grandmother Devereux, who had a dramatic gift, in family worship, rattled about his ears. He accepted the literal interpretation of the Scriptures in a gulp. He believed in everything. There seemed to be no security anywhere; devils were fairly belching wrath.

It was not often that Fred gave reins to his imagination, but when he did, it carried him like wild horses.

Jerry, in the meantime, urged on by some last instinct of pride, shook himself back into his humanity, dropped off dumbly by the stack of disused hunting stables, and huddled quietly down in a loose-box.

And Jill, with closed lips and head erect, went marching up to the front door.

Until that moment, in spite of her odd fellow-feeling for her grandmother, and her occasional and reluctant admiration for the methods of that lady, Jill silently hated Mrs. Devereux. The baffling, unanswerable quality in Mrs. Devereux — her power of detachment—offended every inch of Jill. In the presence of her grandmother the potential greatnesses in Jill—which often made her feel like a giantess—invariably dwindled

to vanishing point. Under the irritating reservations of those calm, keen grey eyes, never once in all her life had Jill risen to her highest point.

And the very fact of knowing that Grandmother Devereux was the only audience she had yet encountered to whom it was worth while to play up, increased Jill's rancour a thousandfold. If only she would attend to her—with fixed, absorbed eyes—Jill detested half measures; if just sometimes she would clap her. Often in those days Jill's heart and soul and brain were all madly throbbing to be clapped.

Into her little life there had come moments when she could have beaten with her two brown fists at the doors of her grandmother's eyes until they should come rushing out of their exasperating graves to be openly proud of her or even to be openly astonished at her—which, just at that period, did not really matter so very much to Jill.

With an illimitable best struggling always to the light, to be for ever baffled back upon a bad second-best, curdles the youth in a girl; and the hate that grows up in the silence from a reasonable basis will inevitably turn bitter. But now sorrow and shame were for the moment wiping out hatred, and every step she took up that long avenue wrung some new thing out of Jill's twisting heart.

When she reached the flight of stone steps that led up to the door, she paused in their long shadows, put up both her hands to cover her face, and, with a view to clearing the road for action, gave one big gasp.

Honora O'Neill, crossing the hall with the stocking-basket, called out to her warningly that the "misthress was at accounts," and not to be disturbed. Then she paused to stare, and when Jill flatly disobeyed her—dull as she was with rheumatism and a chronic state of mourning for a husband from whose onslaughts, while still in the flesh, the poor creature had worn out her knees in praying God to deliver her—instead of protesting, she stared again, her eyes round with wonder. She hesitated even before attributing Jill's amazing conduct "to tanthrums," and in the end only did it through sheer

force of habit; for, like all her tribe, Honora was a born Conservative.

But Jill went on unheeding. If she stood still, she must certainly begin to shiver, and to shiver into the presence of Grandmother Devereux would never do.

Her grandmother, even at the second knock, making no sign, Jill opened the door and boldly walked in.

When Mrs. Devereux did her accounts at a little desk beside her bedroom window, the whole island was aware in a dim way that "th'ould misthress was working heaven and earth to force two and two into makin' five"—a cheese-paring and rapacious habit that "took" her about the time the Captain, Jerry's father, had gone to London for good.

Now, to Jill's bewilderment, she was engaged in this debased form of juggling through a pair of glasses that were always supposed to have belonged to that unhappy ancestor who had gone blind. Under the shadow of the great tortoise-shell battlements she was looking wistfully from a heap of silver to a smaller one of gold and notes.

"As if this sort of thing mattered!" thought Jill haughtily, her anger sweeping in all her courage.

"Grandmother!" she said abruptly.

Mrs. Devereux whipped off her great goggles, and for a minute stared out into the silence with a helpless, lost sort of look that brought back Jill's tendency to shake, and made her suddenly at a loss how to begin. In the next minute Mrs. Devereux had caught sight of her small figure, and came towering towards her quite in her old style, her back like a board, her eyes blazing.

"This is beyond bearing," she said. "I wouldn't stand it from an archbishop, not to say from you. One has at least a right to one's privacy."

"Grandmother Devereux, sit down," said Jill regally.

For one moment Mrs. Devereux felt an overwhelming desire to box her ears; the next the audacity in the tone, and the little figure as straight as her own, touched her grim humour.

"Stop this masquerading," she said harshly, "and go."

"You might know—can't you see?—I didn't come here for nothing. For goodness' sake, sit down."

"Jill, may I ask if you're demented?"

Steadying her sight upon her grandmother's brooch, Jill plunged into narrative. When there was no more to be told, she lifted her eyes fearfully from the brooch to the face above it, and a queer panic seized her.

"Say anything!" she cried, in a choked voice.

It was, however, a minute or more before Mrs. Devereux spoke. Jill was beginning to feel petrified under the unseeing stare bent upon her.

"Coward!" muttered the old woman at last, with slow, concentrated bitterness.

"At least, he was never afraid in his life."

"Except of his duty."

Mrs. Devereux looked as though she were stiffening into the semblance of an image.

"It was good-nature from beginning to end," cried Jill, nearly suffocating.

"Good nature has broken more hearts than ever it will heal, and in the hands of a fool it's a two-edged sword. Go, child, go!"

The old woman turned heavily towards the table, but the next instant she seized the high bed-post and literally lifted herself back to the full use of her wits, and the eyes that had looked dead and dreadful flamed back slowly into life.

"Why didn't Jerry tell me himself?" she demanded.

"It wasn't his fault. He wanted to, but I felt sure you'd never stand the sight of him without his uniform. You'd be saying it all out, you know, and hating yourself afterwards like anything. I—I could have killed him myself"—this Jill hissed out between her little white teeth—"I could, like a rat!"

Mrs. Devereux's mouth twisted itself into a ghostly grin, but she clung tighter to the bed-post, and her eyelids kept closing.

"Go!" she commanded imperiously.

With one last look of doubt Jill turned and went out. The

instant the door closed upon her Mrs. Devereux made one supreme effort to right herself.

"Never in all my born days have I made an idiot of myself like this," she protested, panting; "and I'm not going to begin now."

To stand upright any longer was impossible, however, so hand over hand, slowly as a boy will swing himself down a rickety post, Mrs. Devereux got herself, at last, to the ground.

"Thank God I don't tight-lace," she muttered feebly, "or I'd choke."

And then huddling down she forgot everything, and had a little rest. She half roused herself presently, cold and confused, to see standing above her, laughing, a boy in his first midshipman's jacket, of a blue, brighter and far more beautiful than Jerry's; there was a little white stock round his neck, and frills fell over his long white hands. Mrs. Devereux seemed all at once to be suffocating. But it was only her heart swelling up again with hope.

With that she opened her eyes full, and perceived that she had just seen Phil, her first failure, and that presently she would be called upon to see Jerry, her last. For thus was history always repeating itself for Mrs. Devereux. And of a sudden, instead of swelling, her heart began to shrink and shrink and shrink, until she felt choked in another sort of way altogether. This was hope leaking out again drop by drop.

For a long time she lay quiet, too tired and dull to move. But at last when her wits came tottering in one by one and began to settle down in their places, it struck her that, with her grey hair splashed out like a wisp of a comet's tail upon the dark oaken floor, she must present a somewhat degraded appearance, and certainly have been maundering. She lifted herself up with a good deal of pain and then everything came back to her as clear as day.

"I can't face it," she said aloud, "not just now. I shall wait until the night."

She dragged herself to the glass and put back her heavy hair decently under its covering of lace.

"Thank goodness," she exclaimed sharply, "Jill has been spared this exhibition—a nice example for her, to be sure! And the child has really behaved admirably."

She sat down again and for a whole hour strove patiently with her accounts.

The private accounts of Mrs. Devereux might, indeed, have been scored upon a notched stick. She was simple in her methods, paid as she went, and her wants were pruned with care. The accounts of the estate were hardly less simple. They were short, clear, and to the purpose, designed to fit the comprehension of the smallest farmer on the property who chose to take exception to any supposed exaction put upon him. Mrs. Devereux was a just steward, in more ways than one, and scorned to bewilder honest minds into doubt by dint of figures. It was complications only known to herself that sent Mrs. Devereux to her round table to try to juggle that fatal four into five.

When she had closed her books and locked her money and papers into a drawer, she rested her head on both her arms for a minute.

"If Jill only knew a little of the accounts of this family," she said presently, half under her breath, rising and looking out into the dusk, "she'd know that it's not for the great things in life one has any need to dread the gall of words. I wonder—I wonder how long ago it is since I last spoke out all my mind. Ah! it isn't words that bring wrinkles, it's silence. How young I was that last time, to be sure, and how pretty!" She turned with grave dignity towards the glass. "When I look at the little paltry befringed things they call beauties nowadays! Pah! —I wonder—I wonder if my last hope will look at all like his father the day he failed. I'd better go and ascertain. However he looks, no doubt he'll be hungry."

CHAPTER IV

In that she was mistaken, however. Jerry's emotions were apparently set too sharp for hunger. Supper, so far as he was concerned, was a mere pretence, and although he had eaten nothing for hours, this unnatural abstinence, to give him his due, was in no sort of way a pose. He was too utterly dejected to seek consolation in good mutton chops; for under the inexorable tyranny of old habit, Grandmother Devereux had, almost mechanically, made a little fête of the home-coming of Jerry.

Mrs. Devereux had spent so many of the silent years in taking observations upon her family, that it had become second nature with her. So now, having swallowed her chop—to her mind no tragedy could excuse wanton waste—she sat with patient crossed hands mentally contrasting Jerry's behaviour with that of his father upon another characteristic occasion, when he, too, had a statement to make.

"He was just eight years older than Jerry," she thought, her face growing suddenly extraordinarily gentle; "and he came unexpectedly in the middle of a dinner-party, and the minute he came we all began to—to live! And when they had all gone he told us that he was 'stony-broke.' I had never heard the expression, and Nat had to explain it. The present generation has seemingly less self-control."

Mrs. Devereux looked curiously round her board.

Jerry with chop untouched, countenance pallid and drawn, was absorbed in seeking opportunities to level volleys of mute entreaty at Jill. Jill, sublimely impervious, her eyes fixed upon her plate, was steadily consuming her supper. Mrs. Devereux nodded with grim approval and went back to Jerry.

"So this is the dawn of calf-love!" she thought, with increased anxiety. "One forgets that the boy is nearing seventeen and the right temperament. The sooner the colonies

claim him," she thought presently, with a great leap of her heart, "the better for both of them."

"Will none of you have any honey? No? Well, then, we'd better go to the drawing-room and have a little music."

It was her afflicting nervous shyness in the face of yet another crushed hope, when one has already touched the bottom of the sad casket, that prompted Mrs. Devereux to this original method of slow torture. She was not yet ready to see Jerry alone. But Jill put it down to congenital fiendishness. And forthwith her abundant reserve of hate came all flooding back upon her.

She had thrown her whole heart into practising the difficult treble of the three duets selected by Mrs. Devereux for the family entertainment, and could make every note sing like a bird. Now with the vision of Jerry in the window-seat simmering in the misery of expectation, Jill made the piano, seriously in need of new buffing, fairly squeak like a pig. For when Jill set her mind to it she could extract horrifying things from the suffering instrument, and from her earliest years had found it an unchallengeable and convenient channel for the expression of the emotions. So frequently was this the case, indeed, that Mrs. Devereux hadn't so much as an idea of how really well Jill could play. And even now, in the very thick of her tempest of indignant protest, Jill was painfully conscious of this fact.

"I think," said Mrs. Devereux at last, with the self-control of seven devils—"I think you had all better go to bed. You appear to be tired."

Without a movement of her countenance she proceeded to read a portion out of the Psalms for the evening, received with impartial equanimity her nightly dole of kisses, and dismissed her family.

"I say," said Fred, pausing half-way up the stairs to wipe his forehead, which certainly was in need of attention; one of Fred's offences in Jill's sight being that he would persist in getting damp under emotion—"I say, it's pretty mean, you know, to play like that."

"You to talk, indeed, with eighty boys to throw it off on, and nine months in the year to do it in. And me with nothing but a tin piano and Miss Le Cam, now the Fontaine kids are cut off."

"But it's yourself you give fits to," persisted Fred stoutly.

"Yah! But other people have 'em worse!" she retorted, with proud conviction.

Fred's mind often made insensibly for just balance.

"If you can do a thing splendidly and do it so as to make people wish they were dead," said Fred, "it's sort of skunking."

"Oh, is it?" said Jill, flushing. "You'd better give us a lead, then, and do something yourself splendidly."

"I don't suppose anybody'd care particularly if I did."

With startling and unexpected alacrity, Fred whipped a candle from the landing-table to examine Jill's face, but Jill as nimbly threw back her head and baffled him.

"Make them care, then," said she. "*I* shall. Thank goodness, even when I do my worst I can make their flesh creep, and I can look all the time," she added complacently, "as if I was getting on beautifully. I'd die sooner than keep slinging round corners as if I wasn't worth tuppence-ha'penny —if I was, you know."

She paused, and in her turn shifted her candle the more conveniently to inspect Fred, who stood as stolid as usual under her scrutiny.

"If you are the family straw," she observed composedly, "let us know, do, and act like it. Goodness knows, we'd be glad enough of anything in the shape of one just now. And no matter what I happened to be," she remarked, with a significant raising of her melodious voice, "I'd eat my supper, especially if things were added on for me on purpose."

At this sweet-voiced bitterness, Jerry, who in a spasm of vile and unprecedented humility had been halting a step or two behind them, plucked himself together, and with the air of Lucifer dethroned marched off to bed.

Having discharged her shafts and eased her spirit, Jill went likewise to her room. She paused in the act of saying her

prayers, and deciding that with things in the state they were, any attempt in that direction would be, to say the least of it, low, she arose and got into bed. She put her head under the bedclothes, and, in order to keep Jerry out of her mind, repeated "Sweet Auburn! loveliest village," at the top of her speed, and being tired out with misery she soon fell asleep.

It was dark still when she awoke—a deep, grey darkness, with just one little flicker of shadowed brightness afar in the east.

She lay half-dazed still to wonder why she felt so singularly horrid, when an odd sound that trembled soughing through the room shot her bolt upright in her bed, her superstitious soul stark with fright.

It was only Grandmother Devereux moaning in her sleep. It seemed to Jill that she had been hearing that sound just exactly when she didn't want to ever since she was born. She jumped out of bed, splashed into her bath, scurried on her clothes, and fled noiselessly down the stairs, through the little garden-door out into the dawn.

"As if there wasn't enough without that just now," she thought resentfully, warming her hands on the sleek, soft back of an old setter, who, being himself wakeful, at the sound of a friend's footfall had sauntered yawning out of his kennel. "Couldn't she snore sensibly, like any one else? If she knew she went on like this, disturbing the household, wouldn't she be wild just, that's all!"

For the fraction of a second, another point of view seized Jill's imagination, and she permitted herself to feel rather sorry for Grandmother Devereux. But the memory of Jerry in the window-seat, stewing in misery, restored her to common sense. She took hold of Flora's collar, and the two ran races till they glowed.

The air was joyful now with morning sounds, and thrilled with the singing of birds. And in spite of herself, of fact, and of reason, Jill, in her wayward way, began also to tingle with audacious delight.

"Come up, Flora!" she cried; "let's see the sun rising over the hill."

They had just reached the crest when the sun broke loose from his last red cloud to baptize the earth in a morning glory of gold, and sent shadows, and terrors, and ghosts all flying.

Jill fairly stood on tip-toe to make sure that nothing should escape her. She drank in the delight in gulps; she bathed in it; she circled round in it. And before she knew what she was about she was singing at the top of her voice the first thing that came to her. It was a sea-song with a gay lilt in it, picked up from Jerry.

Mrs. Devereux, standing in her window, looking up wearily at the graves, listened hopelessly.

"I thought if anything in the whole world would have softened her, this would," she said sternly. "The girl is beyond me." She turned wrathfully away.

But even with her uncompromising back planted firmly against temptation, Mrs. Devereux drank in the full, rich, audacious notes.

"And to think that last night she could play as she did! I wonder sometimes if the girl's human."

When Fred heard her he was in the act of striving to make his unruly shock of hair look even a little like Jerry's. He paused to listen, puzzled and uncomfortable.

"Jill howling out songs with the family feeling the way it does!" he muttered.

Then, according to his wont, he began to ravel Jill out and adjust her to the forms of his simple understanding, and presently he got her right.

"She has to be happy when she gets the chance, or else she'd blow up. That's how it is with Jill," said Fred to himself. "And can't she sing just!" He brushed on reflectively. "All the same, I rather wish she'd shut up. Pretty beastly for Jerry if he hears her before he's had it out with Grandmother Devereux."

Which proves that even boy in his unreclaimed state is not destitute of a prompting or so of magnanimity in its more simple forms, for Fred was fourteen, in an Eton jacket, with a

face as smooth as a billiard ball, while Jerry, chucked out of the Navy or not, wore a very good imitation of "tails," and, given a week's notice, could with the greatest ease produce an unmistakable moustache; and they both adored Jill.

As it happened, Jerry did hear every note of Jill's rousing ditty and he felt as though every inch of him were crunching green gooseberies. He had torn himself from his bed to make his peace with Jill and offer explanations. Jerry was an expert in the matter of explaining.

He naturally supposed her to be as sunken in incurable misery as himself; he found her shouting a doggerel!

"Perhaps it's just bluff," he thought hopefully, out of his ambush, a narrow path between sweet-briar hedges through which Jill must pass. The next instant she came towards him, her eyes like shooting stars, her cheeks two poppies. Bluff, indeed!

Jerry had not been given a Devereux back for nothing. He stiffened it and marched to meet her.

"You!" she said. "You! And up at this hour! Dear me!"

The queer quick way in which, directly she saw him, every symptom of rejoicing seemed to be wiped off Jill, although it made Jerry feel cold and clammy, restored all his confidence in her, and some in himself. At least Jill was within reach again. And of a sudden the invincible magician To-morrow was hammering imperiously at all the senses of Jerry.

"I got up to speak to you."

Jill glanced stonily at his pleading eyes. They had only fallen into this habit of pleading the last half-year, and Jill's instincts were as keen as knives. She had her suspicions. Nevertheless, her feet slackened to his and sidled towards one hedge, so that if he felt so disposed Jerry could screw himself in beside her under the other.

"Oh, did you?" said she. "What about?"

"What would it be likely to be about, I'd like to know?"

"Oh. About yourself and the Navy." Jill spoke largely, looked straight ahead of her, and tried hard to keep her voice

steady. She succeeded so well that Jerry jerked up his head and clenched his fist sharply. "But that," she added, "is all done with."

"If it's done with, I'm not. A fellow can begin again."

"Begin what?"

Jerry's eyes wandered pathetically.

"Oh, something."

"Something! Something's like a Scotch reel, without beginning or end, nothing but middle," she mused. "That's just exactly how—I spend my time. It would be the death of you. You don't know what things with no regular beginnings or ends are like."

"You help a chap a lot."

His eyes flung out bitter disappointment at Jill, then they dropped in a panic. There were tears raining down Jill's cheeks. Her rigid dignity of mien was, however, unimpaired, and it was clear that she would die sooner than make any attempt to conceal them.

Jerry had, in his time, seen other girls cry, and the spectacle, even when the exciting cause had been himself, had left him unmoved, except occasionally to a mild amusement. But Jill with tears upon her cheeks, and all for him, was a new revelation of sorrow. In spite of the twisting of his heart-strings, however, Jerry being after all but budding man, could not fail to experience some painful gratification.

"Something means nothing in particular," commented Jill. If her tears had escaped her, she still held her tongue well in hand. "How can you help a person to nothing in particular? He can stumble into that himself. Being an admiral, of course, is another sort of thing altogether. You know what you're after. You can see your way. From the very first step of the ladder you can behold your flag flying. You've got to make for that flag and just to keep on all the time feeling that you'd rather die than dishonour it. And if you didn't," said Jill, her blazing eyes burning up the tears, "I'd take jolly good care to see that you did. That's where I came in. I don't come in at all now."

"Jill!"

"Help any one to do—*something*, indeed! It's bad enough to be doing nothing else all day yourself. You must see your end before you can go for it." She narrowed her eyes to peer. "From the look of you, it's my belief you'll be taking next to muddling about in beginnings."

"Do you mean to throw me up, then?" demanded Jerry, in proud despair.

"You can't expect me to keep tracking you up and down ladders. I'd have to be—saying things—just to keep myself going. You'd precious soon hate the sight of me."

There was by this time not so much as the memory of a tear about Jill, but her mouth betrayed her. She might feel herself quite equal to killing him, but Jerry knew now that nothing in the whole world would induce her to leave him altogether in the lurch. He plucked at the skirts of his courage.

"But we'd arranged it all. We can't change now. We'd settled to hang together, we two, always."

Jill turned to look at him with indulgent pity.

"One must have something to hang on to. We can't swirl round together in the air for ever, like those two poor beasts on their road to hell."

"Jill, if you'll help——"

"Do you think, if you couldn't manage a few common sailors," she inquired temperately, "that you could possibly hope to cope with me? I think we'd better arrange it all over again, when you've had it out with Grandmother Devereux, you know, and set off again after something distinct. Only I'll have to see it with my two eyes as plain as I could see an admiral."

"With you to talk to, Jill, I can see——"

"Even without me you can half shut your eyes and see anything, if you think hard enough. That's what you were after, I dare say, when you expected the admiral and all the captains to help you undermining the discipline of the British Navy. It's the way good nature always begins. By the time it ends,

goodness knows, you can see plain enough! Just ask Grandmother Devereux!"

"Oh, Jill, you can be horrid!"

But Jill was hot in pursuit of an idea.

"From now on I'll pray in church, 'From all good nature, and softness of heart, good Lord, deliver us, and make us see straight.' I wish to goodness I'd tried it before. You'd have thought saying things would do as well; it hasn't apparently." She sighed. "Thank goodness, I haven't turned atheist yet."

Jerry fairly gasped. Jill generally evinced an amiable readiness to explain any obscurity that might characterise her discourse.

"If you don't believe in things you see, you needn't be afraid of them. It seems depraved," she mused sadly, "to be put off by things that perhaps haven't a leg to stand on. One likes to be sure. However, with you in this hobble, it won't do to throw anything with any help at all in it overboard. I'll stick to believing for the present. There's Fred about breakfast. Goodness, no; it's about Grandmother Devereux. You can see it in his shoulders. I wish Fred'd learn not to look ashamed of himself on account of other people." She glanced round at Jerry. "Now, that's Grandmother Devereux all over to make you swallow it on an empty stomach, like Gregory's powder. Jerry, whatever you do, keep as close as you can to 'Yes' and 'No,' and hold yourself up, do. If you cringe, you're lost. I'll tell you what I'll do," she whispered excitedly. "She'll sit in the big chair in the side window, with her back to the light, and you facing her. That's the latest arrangement; she sees more of you, and you see less of her. It's an awful mistake, if only she could know. So I'll scout round and get up in the pear-tree and look down at you. I can't hear, so it won't matter. It's a wonderful leg-up to have some one to watch how well you can do things," said Jill, rather wistfully.

"You're a girl, you see," said Jerry, with a lack of conviction in his voice.

"I am, worse luck; but it's just because you're a boy that I'm bothering myself to do this for you."

"Anyway, Jill, you're a brick."

"Go on, Jerry; and do, for goodness' sake, look as if you'd just swallowed a poker."

The sight of Fred, whose mission had been accepted as tacitly as it had been given, awkwardly jabbing at a thistle, irritated Jill. Moreover, she wanted to get rid of him.

"Fred, I wish you wouldn't stand like a stuck pig," she remarked sweetly. "How did she look?"

"Rather stone-wally."

"I thought as much. She's been at it now for fifteen hours, and words aren't in it. She needn't have sent you, all the same. That's what comes of looking as if you weren't worth tuppence. Very likely she thought you wouldn't mind."

Fred's mouth twitched, but he said nothing. Words seemed to be as vain and empty in his case as in that of Jerry.

"Fred," said she suddenly wheedling, "go and feed the hedgehog, do now. I have something to see to at the other side."

Fred stared, but moved off, obedient; and Jill, darting round the house, was up the pear-tree like a squirrel.

When presently the little party, having prayed decorously, sat down to breakfast, a big square envelope on Fred's plate turned Jill's eyes black. In the memory of man no big envelope with a great coat of arms spread out on it had ever before come Fred's way. The school bills were sent to Mrs. Devereux; anything else in the shape of a letter that might reach Fred was scrawled on an insignificant envelope, generally dirty. While he was opening his letter, Fred's hand shook, but by the time he had finished it, they were as steady as usual and his face was white. But when he put the letter back in the envelope in a mannish sort of way that made even Grandmother Devereux look across at him, and fell to upon his breakfast, it was a little too much. Jill thrust out her toe and fetched him one stinging kick on the shin, for Fred, to give

him his due, never yelled, as Jerry could never be trusted, in like circumstances, not to do.

Mrs. Devereux, after her momentary start, plunged upon the political situation. And Jerry, after one preliminary thrill of suprise, fell back upon his own affairs, and lost count with the prevailing play of emotion. His one definite sensation was a boundless craving to put himself beyond the reach of Grandmother Devereux's stone-wall countenance, which that morning he had met for the first time.

With an inextinguishable movement of pity for the boy Mrs. Devereux curtailed her masterly exposure of the pervading and profound imbecility of Her Majesty's advisers to half its usual length.

Jill, taken unawares, nearly fell into the folly of following Jerry, but she recovered herself in time, defied all custom, and planted herself firmly beside Fred, who, as cool as a cucumber, handed his letter to Grandmother Devereux. Mrs. Devereux had got into a way of peering and frowning, and taking hours over everything she read. Now she seemed to take years, and when she had read right through the letter, she said nothing, but began again.

Once more was Jill driven to do something, so this time she trod upon Fred's toe firmly.

Mrs. Devereux had a sharp little struggle with herself before she could find the right words to say to Fred.

Although she had been zealous in her duty towards the boy, Mrs. Devereux had never cared for him especially. He was a shy, ungainly boy with mooning habits and a way of slouching that every time he came near her drove Mrs. Devereux to the verge of distraction. All the men she had loved as fiercely as she had spent herself for them had walked like kings in their youth, and every head of all her tribe looked as though it had been made for a crown.

And now, with her heart bleeding because of the failure of the last of this brave and comely line, the poor, plain boy, whom she had taken for charity into their old home, was waiting for her judgment upon his first success.

Mrs. Devereux's heart, when stripped of its grave-clothes, was too strong and sound not to be generous. And now, with heart and voice and eyes all full of unshed tears, she found it so hard to face this new strange duty, to do full and fitting justice to Fred in her congratulations, that she was simply forced into reading the letter twice. When she had read it, she put her hand out a little vaguely, and got hold of a heavy chair.

"Fred, this is a very big thing to have got, isn't it?" she said cordially.

"It's not bad," said Fred, slowly shrivelling up.

"By the tone of the letter, I should say it was exceptionally good. 'The best open scholarship in the greatest school in England;' 'we are all extremely proud of you.' Those are the words, are they not? I am glad that one of my kith and kin can go to Eton. It is two generations now since any one of us has been there. I wonder you didn't mention this possibility to any of us, Fred."

"It was such an off-chance."

"And we'd probably have put it down to mooning and sums on the brain."

With Fred the centre of a sensation, Jill could no longer hold in her words.

"That comes," she serenely added, "of getting into the way of always being passed over."

Jill's uncompromising statement of affairs provided Mrs. Devereux with a new and disturbing point of view. But the sharp eyes of the girl left her no time for reflection.

"There's something else in that envelope, Fred."

"Oh, it's only a list——"

"A list of things. Oh, well, you have heaps," said Jill easily.

Mrs. Devereux put out her hand dictatorially.

"Let me have the list."

"He must have an entirely new outfit," she thought hurriedly, "and five shillings a week at the very least; and with Jerry to start all over again."

Her heart fell. She glanced at the list.

"Oh, the usual things," she said carelessly, putting the sheet in her pocket. "Things quite suitable for a preparatory school would, of course, not do for a great public school. I'll go over it at my leisure, Fred."

"Why on earth couldn't you have been a Devereux, Fred?" said Jill, as soon as they were out of hearing. "Being a Morton takes half the shine off things for her. The way she rose to the scratch like a brick shows that list was simply awful. Do Eton things cost much?"

"Rather!" said Fred gloomily.

"And she'll get them at the best shops, you bet your boots," mused Jill vulgarly.

Fred flung up his head and his eyes flared out at things in general. In the first moment of exultation the action was certainly out of order, but Jill paused to admire it.

"You'd look quite decent if only you'd swagger a bit," she murmured thoughtfully. "I wonder if your mother being a saint had anything to do with it. Look at Jerry on his beam ends over beside the grove, looking like a duke. You'd think 'twas he had got 'the best scholarship in the greatest school in England, and we're all exceedingly proud of you.' There's never been a shred of a saint among the Devereuxs that I know of, yet Jerry couldn't look hang-dog to save his life."

"He has you to help him to fail decently," said Fred, his heart aching.

"Well, there's something in that. I dare say I'd help you to succeed decently," she added, with magnanimity, "if you'd buck up."

"I'll be taking box-fulls of charity from Grandmother Devereux this time," blurted Fred suddenly, in response to Jill's fillip of sympathy.

"I'm afraid, Fred, you must have a low mind." Jill looked ineffably haughty. "As if Grandmother Devereux—Good gracious, if she was to hear you, just think how she'd look!"

"She'd look the very image of you. But it's charity all the same," he said obstinately, with glowering eyes.

"As you don't appear to know how to succeed," said Jill sternly, "perhaps you'd like to go rage round a bit among the tombs in sackcloth and ashes. I'll go and help Jerry to begin again."

CHAPTER V

JUST five years before Jerry Devereux had received his dismissal from the Navy, upon a brief visit to his ancestral home Captain Devereux had been shocked out of his restful habit of elegant irony by discovering that his only son was fast acquiring an Irish accent.

Lawrence Devereux liked to do things well, and since upon a close inspection he found that Jerry was every inch a Devereux, it struck him that the lad might as well go to Eton. The idea, as it revolved in his mind, gathered force daily, until in the end it assumed the proportions of a fixed resolve. Whereupon, with Jerry's accent like grit upon his teeth, Lawrence set forth for London to make arrangements for his son's education. Pending these arrangements, however, it was obviously impossible that Jerry could be permitted to run wild through the land.

Even had Lawrence not pronounced Miss Le Cam, the hereditary instructress of the island, quite impossible, Jerry and Jill combined must inevitably have wiped her out. And this, under the circumstances, would have been a serious matter for Jill's future. There was, besides, Fred to be considered.

The village schoolmaster was, as it happened, a mathematical genius, and under his care Fred was pushing forward in great strides. Being, moreover, of a commonplace and unimaginative nature, he could even put aside Miss Le Cam's front and the vivacity of her manners—a Huguenot survival, she was careful to explain, combined with the best Parisian education—and learn all she had to teach him. Fred therefore might very well have waited for a year or so. But Fred,

after all, was only one of the family by courtesy, an unloved burthen, and according to the iron code of Mrs. Devereux he could be treated in no sort of way less amply than Jerry.

There followed then a period of ghastly silences during meal times, and Grandmother Devereux, when not driving round harrying the farmers for rent—prepared by Jill, however, they were generally safe on the mainland—might be frequently seen at her window, her nose blue with the cold, glued to the great account books.

When Mrs. Devereux, having succeeded in gathering in a tithe of her just dues, had got over what was known in the island as "the poor ould misthress's skhin-flintin' fit," she went over one day to the mainland, and the whole island stretched itself out body and soul in her kitchen and drank tea.

The next week two substantial boxes of clothing arrived for the boys, and two days later they were packed off to Mr. Perrsse's preparatory school, carried on in a great rambling mansion set on the shores of the Atlantic.

Thus, whilst Captain Devereux, when not engaged in scattering abroad a pretty wit, was still busy seeing his way to do the right thing by the boy, the boy, as happy as a king, in addition to the Irish accent, was acquiring many more desirable things at Clonkiel. For Mr. Perrsse, known far and wide as "poor Masther Mat, th'usher; God help him!" being himself sound in body and mind, a scholar and a gentlemen, knew what he was about when he set forth to build up small boys. He had, besides, the advantage of being knit to the tribe of the Devereuxs by ties of blood, of understanding, therefore, something of the family constitution, and the mortar best fitted to its building needs. And upon any point not altogether quite clear to his comprehension Mrs. Devereux took care to throw an unstinted light.

Jerry had hitherto been brought up chiefly by his other grandmother, a foolish old woman, who, having for some eight years over-petted, over-fed, and over-financed the boy, finally cast him for a new toy in the shape of a limp and needy

young husband. And in the new and nipping air of school, life was not all glitter and dash for the spoilt boy. But spurred to his feet by circumstances and Jill, he managed to swagger safe enough through the mill.

And then Mrs. Devereux went back to the old days and fell to piling up hopes in her heart again. At first she did it diffidently, excusing herself as she went. For she had reared many men and seen much sorrow, and the vanity of all things was in the marrow of her bones.

But when at the end of his seventh term Jerry's eyes had grown as steady as a pointer's, and she had ascertained by chance that through two terms and one long, hot, thirsty summer vacation he had not once borrowed from Fred and forgotten to pay, she permitted her heart to sing a little song whenever he came near, and her hard eyes began to turn to him for rest, as thirty years before they used to turn to his father, only then they could pierce through a stone wall, and had not yet begun to ache.

About this time Captain Devereux, for certain special reasons of his own, paid another flying visit to his family home, and once more did he find himself obliged to ward off the Irish accent with raised hands, whilst volleys of nimble wit were let loose at its expense.

His arrangements for Eton were still incomplete when a friend, in response to an unexpected display of paternal emotion, offered him a nomination in the Royal Navy for his son. Of a sudden Lawrence, with justifiable pride, remembered his great-uncle the Admiral, and discovered in Jerry a born sailor.

There was an excellent naval class at Mr. Perrsse's school, but Captain Devereux had been genuinely touched by the accent. He insisted upon his own grinding responsibility in the matter of Jerry and removed him, at his mother's expense, to a naval school with "a name to it." The poor lad would now, at last, have some chance of learning the meaning of "form."

Jerry took to "form" and costly habits like a seal to water,

so much so that Captain Devereux felt himself at last justified in submitting his heir to the final test of expert criticism. Jerry came forth from the fire triumphant, and in the end entered the Navy like a gentleman, instead of being shot into it some other way.

Through the entire episode, however, Captain Devereux was invariably gentle to the quiet objections of his mother and never forgot to be indulgent to her limitations.

"Never out of that confounded island these forty years, poor old lady, and with the retail mind of a good woman. 'Pon my soul, I'd rather have cut off my right hand than interfere. Women like doing things their own way. But after all there are certain facts in nature which all the cynicism in the world won't bilk. A son *is* a son."

Had he been a man of less ample mind, Captain Devereux might have sneered at his own honest emotions; on the contrary, he felt them to be symptoms of a still youthful liver. He poured himself out some whiskey and Apollinaris, and having discussed the advantages of an evangelical heredity with a bishop of his acquaintance, strolled off to play poker with an amateur.

But the silences of Grandmother Devereux gathered and grew, and she no longer consciously piled up hopes.

She cleaned the carpets, however, on the eve of Jerry's home-comings, and saw that all the stately old mahogany and brass in her great bare rooms shone like jewels. For Jerry always loved his home.

And now he must leave it, the last of his line, a failure, and an ungainly outsider take his place on the first great step up the everlasting ladder. And she must set her face and her voice and her heart to the right key in order to wish him luck on his way. This accomplished decently and in order, and with a thoroughness and determination that made Fred's foolish flesh shrivel on his bones, Mrs. Devereux sat down to face and vanquish the matter of the Eton outfit.

With Jerry's inevitable banishment like hot lead in her sore heart, this was difficult, but since the other boy must be

provided for within a week, Mrs. Devereux mastered her emotions and opened her safe.

Even with her new spectacles on and the sunlight falling into the open windows, things seemed very dim and dark. She grew confused; she could find nothing; she gave a wrathful tug forward to the heavy chest, but in spite of her great strength she barely shook it. She stood pondering for a moment, then with an odd, helpless protest in her face, sat down and sighed. The horrid mute pathos in the attitude of the woman as she sat peering, suddenly in an odd way struck herself. She stood up, gave a slight mocking laugh, and fell to walking up and down the long bare room like an old lion.

"I can't help it," she said presently, "last chance or not, I'll have to use that money. The boy must be sent off decent; and Jerry—ah, Jerry! And I'll have to use those magnifying abominations, too, in spite of that doctor person. I can't see a wink without them. It's Jerry, I suppose.—That old owl said I must be guarded from all worry and shock, both fatal. 'My dear Mrs. Devereux'"—like Jill, Mrs. Devereux quite unconsciously always mimicked those of whom she disapproved—"'you must live in a glass case like a wedding-cake.' Wouldn't Jill enjoy herself watching me! Never to the day of my death will I forget the irritating insolent suavity of the creature as he multiplied his foolish words.—Dear me, it's come to a pretty pass when I can't even find the destroying magnifiers."

She groped about, however, till she did find them, a silent fierce dignity of protest in all her sweeping, noiseless movements.

"Ah, this is better," said she, lifting her dauntless head again. "Being blind clouds your mind—confuses you. Imagine regulating a family like this with a clouded intellect!"

She touched a spring and took from the shelf that shot out a little parcel marked "Operation." Then she slowly counted out a hundred pounds in notes.

"Just enough," she said quietly; "and my eye could have been ready in three months, he said. Dear me, think of

standing on the hill again and looking out over four counties, and turning to see half across to America! My sight used to beat Nat's hollow. This won't bring it back, however.—I wish to the Lord I could trust Lawrence to buy Fred's clothes. His judgment is so good. His distinctions, however, are too subtle. I'd better commit myself to the germ of common honesty, no doubt essential to the worldly advancement of any reputable tradesman. I'll write to Pant. I wonder if that boy has any inkling of the cost of the thing. I sincerely trust he hasn't. But I've thought more than once that he broods. A legacy from his mother, no doubt—always brooding over her sins or her salvation. Pity her meditations didn't take the practical form of preserving her from marrying a fool. And when Fred's settled, there's Jerry—ah, Jerry!" she repeated softly. "Well, there will be enough with management; and, thank God, there's always the other eye to fall back upon."

But her voice lacked timbre, and her eyes, through their great clumsy glasses, still gloated longingly over her hoard.

CHAPTER VI

A BEAT of horses' hoofs on the avenue, and a sweet, high voice she had good cause to know, apparently haranguing Jill, recalled her to the affairs of the moment. She shut the safe, and, the disfiguring spectacles still upon her nose, marched magnificently to the window.

"Mrs. Fontaine! and, as I'm a living sinner, she's saying that she's come to say good-bye. It's the positively regal effrontery of that woman that turns the heads of men. And her husband a saintly sheep! It was, after all, a cruel dispensation."

When she bent down to arrange the lace scarf over her hair, Mrs. Devereux's eyes flashed curiously through their old spectacles, and the rose-red of youth was upon her cheeks.

"It must be wonderful," she thought, "to be able to grasp all your desires fearlessly, with a light heart—not to care, never to care; just to take what you want, and enjoy it without a qualm. I think I'm mad," she said, pausing at the head of the stairs—"sometimes I fear I must be; for one of my years my heart seems to be so singularly unregenerate. It's the dulness of all these years since Nat died, and the striving and the strife. And now, if I must grope for the rest of my days with all my wits about me—grope round among the Devereuxs before I have seen anything! And the wicked down there flourishing like a green bay-tree!—And God help Jill, she's the born image of me. Even to be decently good she'll have to live in a fever, and she'll never be bad without bloody sweat. However, I'm glad I've routed that woman at last. To have those poor tainted brats within call, and yet be cut off from them, must have been a continual offence to Jill. —And now for my fine madam."

She paused in the doorway to contemplate the innocent profile of her visitor meditating upon a bowl of primroses.

"There's inconsequent vice for you! Thirty if she's a day, and looks twenty. A nice profitable object lesson, to be sure, with Jill about."

"I can't pretend to interpret your feelings by my own, Constance Fontaine," said Mrs. Devereux, sailing in, calmly ignoring the little hand stretched out to her, and taking a seat; "but I should have thought, when by the sheer nature of things you're only admitted on the benefit of a doubt, you'd have refrained from paying calls."

"'Gather your roses while you can,'" quoted the other lady, with her charming laugh. "Although I may admit to a leaning towards the brilliancy of the broader life, never will it be said of me that I cut myself willingly adrift from the tents of the righteous."

"Probably not. Respectability means, after all, comfort. You have always clung to that like a cat, Constance."

"Well, yes, I do like comfort." She looked composedly around the austere, stripped room. "You must allow for

temperament. We can't all be continually offering up ourselves and our things on altars. It would have killed me, for example, to have had to strip my walls in the way you've done. You used to have the best china and the best pictures in the county——"

"So far as I see, this, Constance, is hardly relevant to anything."

"It is really, in a sort of way. By the way, do you know why I've come?"

"I can't say that I do."

"I came to tell you that I've taken your advice. The girls were packed off yesterday to their aunts. They're now in the very stronghold of the folded lamb."

"I'm thankful to hear it, for your mother's sake and theirs."

"And not for mine at all. Can't you see that the girls were my ships, and on your advice I've burnt them? I've put myself in the pillory next door to naked. I've laid myself open to all the concentrated venom cast by every virtuous woman's tongue of my acquaintance. Won't they spew, too, dear things! I've virtually proved myself guilty before I've been tried, and all through you."

"Constance, what are you driving at? What do you want?"

"I want to give you, in return for your timely counsel, a little advice about Jill."

"Pray don't trouble yourself."

"But, since I feel it to be a duty, you, above all people in the world, oughtn't to try to thwart me."

"I have a great deal to do in the mornings. Will you be kind enough to be brief?"

"Do you know that, on the whole, I think Jill has been the best influence my three lambs have ever yet encountered. Like me, their father bores them, and they don't altogether believe in him as a professed Christian. Children are rather sharp, you know, Mrs. Devereux." She leant forward with an odd laugh. "If you'd once seen his diary, you'd never wonder again."

"Did I say, Constance, that I had ever wondered?"

Mrs. Fontaine chuckled softly.

"Well, if Jill gave the girls their first touch of backbone, I'm inclined to think they saved her reason. They provided her at a critical moment with an outlet for her singularly vigorous energies——"

"May I offer you a glass of wine, Mrs. Fontaine?"

"No, thank you. Mrs. Devereux, Jill is rather like what I was at her age, rampant for want of something to do——"

"Jill's time is abundantly filled up."

"It is, with nothings. While she had my three to rattle barefoot over the snow, it was all right; now, when the boys are away, she'll have no one but Miss Le Cam."

"Who teaches admirably."

"And makes you curse the day you were born."

"Mrs. Fontaine, I really have a great deal to do."

"But you're a Christian woman! You wouldn't deprive me of my last direct contact with better things? Besides, perhaps I shouldn't be shivering on the brink now at all, if you'd let me marry Lawrence."

"You don't, I gather, contemplate running away with Lawrence at the present time, Constance?"

"No. Lawrence is a good deal changed."

Mrs Devereux's face was immovable, but it blanched slowly, a fact which did not escape her visitor.

"What Jill wants is just what I wanted. She wants movement," said she, her brilliant elusive face softening strangely. "She wants movement, movement, movement, and her hands full. She's given just what I was given, the island and Miss Le Cam."

"She's given what lies within my power to give her," said Mrs. Devereux, with dignity. She had risen the minute before intending summarily to dismiss her visitor, but the face of Mrs. Fontaine brought back a great deal to the older woman, and the courage in the beautiful audacious face held her.

"Jill is meant to be a power amongst weaker vessels. How

on earth can she fulfil herself here? She can't play you—you, of all people in the world—at the end of a string."

"Suppose you go, Constance."

"Oh, I'm soon going. Jill wants a good sound boarding-school with the mistresses for fitting foes, and a team of girls to drive. She'd do it finely. Why don't you send her to school, Mrs. Devereux?"

Mrs. Devereux sat down again deliberately, and looked at her.

"Because, Constance Fontaine, I can't."

"I thought as much," murmured the other. "You owe me something, Mrs. Devereux. It was you who gave the first turn to the wheel——"

"I owe you nothing. That was a passing madness. Even at eighteen, Constance, given time to turn in, you'd never have married a pauper."

"I might. I didn't want comfort then. I wanted space—like Jill—and Lawrence was going to India."

"And I'm afraid I must go to the garden, Mrs. Fontaine."

"You do owe me something, Mrs. Devereux. It was you who drove me into the folds of the virtuous. Only for that row about Lawrence, I'd never have met Henry. You——"

"And you, Constance, were generally, at least outwardly, well bred. You have altered."

"How can I be well bred, outside or in, with you doing your best to dislodge me from my hold on the last straw of respectability. I can only just hang on for all I'm worth. Can't you give me time to explain? I don't understand my own girls; they bewilder me. Henry's sisters read aloud *Aurora Leigh*, in turns, for months before the birth of each, and Henry was always present to take notes on my intellectual achievement. That put me off somehow. I've never got over the feeling of those babies all being books—*éditions de luxe*, you know, in the best morocco bindings, with the Fontaine crest emblazoned on their backs. But I understood Jill at once, and she, in her turn, understood my brood. Besides,

before ever I saw Jill, I had made up my mind to like her, so as to annoy Henry."

"Possibly, Constance, it might be in better taste to withhold these confidences."

"One must be consecutive, and they bear on my point, more or less, and my point is Jill. Directly Henry comes to a neighbourhood, his notion of parental responsibility is to tip-toe round in his spats—you know his way—to gather up infantile anecdotes concerning the shocking examples of the neighbourhood. The week after Uncle Francis left us this abomination of desolation here, he came back oozing out virtue and the iniquities of Jill. The minute he'd finished I knew that Jill was the leaven prepared by Providence to leaven my lump. If Jill had belonged to me, I do really think I might have managed to forget Henry. I might even have rounded up in the end into a plucked brand. Think of Henry and his sainted sisters all gazing breathlessly at Jill through their pince-nez and wondering how she happened! It must have consoled one for a lot."

"Really, Constance——"

"You do owe me some reparation, Mrs. Devereux. Good gracious! when I think of the things you said and your prophecies. They were rankly libellous, but on the whole they showed insight. My three are now off my hands," she said abruptly, her face grave and a little good. "Look here, Mrs. Devereux, I want you to let me send Jill to school."

"Mrs. Fontaine——"

"It isn't the wages of sin—it isn't really. It's Aunt Agnes's savings."

Mrs. Devereux stood up without a word and walked up and down before the window, her eyes on the ground, her whole being moved to its foundations.

That in spite of her five senses she should be driven to regard this audacious proposal in the light of a temptation was about the deepest humiliation that Mrs. Devereux had as yet been called upon to endure, while the hard, unflinching truth

that underlay all her own actions would not permit her even to resent the insult.

Not two days ago had she girded up her loins, and with prayer and supplication set forth to denounce and scatter an open sinner, and here was the sinner pink and sweet and *débonnaire*, looking ten years younger than she had any right to look, reading her and hers like a book; tacitly claiming kin with them moreover, in all things.

And Mrs. Devereux reverenced truth far too finely to dare to deny her right to the family likeness. Had she been born any other than an Irish Protestant this complication of interests might not have possessed such infinite significance for Mrs. Devereux. As it was it tore and tortured her piteously. She had been brought up to hate the devil and bid him fly before her, not to be noting every salient point in his arguments, and this devastating likeness of his methods to so many of her own.

And the world of school with its depths and its shallows, its half lights and its great illuminations! It would give Jill her freedom. There she could cast her pin feathers and stretch her wings. She could grow and bloom and blossom.

With Jill's very own gesture, Mrs. Devereux threw out her withered arms, and Mrs. Fontaine broke into an odd, sweet, shrill laugh.

It stung the elder woman back to speech. The right words were coming fast. But a splinter of that truth that had been holding her silent ran impetuously past them, and would out.

"Constance Fontaine, you'd have been a notable good woman," she cried, in a ringing voice.

"Mrs. Devereux, you'd have been a delightful bad one."

"I wish to the Lord——"

"Don't. I've done that too. It's just one little turn of the wheel that does it. We've all the usual allowance of deadly sins. It's the quality and size of the conscience that varies, and husbands, and one's natural powers of resisting boredom. One of us married Nat," said she softly, "and the other was bound hand and foot to Henry. That made the difference."

"Constance, I think you'd better go. I said, I believe, on Saturday all that I could say."

"You did your duty nobly, and I never liked you in all my life till then, for instead of enjoying the business as you ought to have done, you fairly hated it, else I shouldn't have come to-day. But you're only unconventional up to a certain point. When the moral shoe pinches your own toe," she said bitterly, her pink, childish face hardening, "you're as conventional as a grocer's wife or an Archbishop. Good-bye."

She looked easily round the room and kissed her hands to the bare walls.

"Good-bye respectability and a high tone! Anyway, Mrs. Devereux, don't let Jill marry a man who keeps a diary, and sisters, and for heaven's sake, don't let her wear magenta stockings, home-dyed; and burn that brown frock. Take my word for it, Jill will be avenging herself on fate, unless you look out."

"If Jill has no love for God," said Mrs. Devereux slowly, her eyes wide and strained, "at least she has some fear of the devil."

"Ah, well, it comes pretty much to the same thing. So far as I can remember, I never cared a fraction for any devil."

CHAPTER VII

YEARS ago, before ever Nat had come into her life, Mrs. Devereux had had a rich admirer who owned vast tracts of country in Australia, and bred sheep in their hundreds of thousands. He was an unreserved person, with violent prejudices; he spoke lovingly of "long drinks," looked upon a bank manager as the centre of culture, said "My word," wore a beard, had his shirt fastened at the back, and hankered after euchre at any hour of the day or night.

Katherine Drake had never tired of observing the habits of this unknown quantity, but to her last day would fail to understand why the man should have proposed to *her*. This

memory, naturally a humiliating one, induced Mrs. Devereux to strike Australia off the list of eligible colonies.

One of her thirteen had perished miserably in Canada. America, therefore, was also out of the question.

India needed some recognised employment, and clothes cut by a West End tailor.

It followed, as a matter of course, that Jerry would have to be dumped down somehow into Africa.

For thus were affairs conducted at Knockeen. Jill no sooner caught rumours of the destined continent than she made for the library, got out the maps, and ransacked the meagre shelves for literature bearing on the subject. Thus, when the official announcement was made next day at luncheon, she was bursting with information.

"Oh, well, Africa isn't quite so low as the other colonies," she observed tolerantly, "an' it's creeping with dangers, and you can amuse yourself. I'm just reading a ripping story about Cairo."

In family crises Jill demanded, and was permitted, a certain latitude of phrase, but in view of eventualities she took the precaution, unlike her usual habit, of speaking at full speed.

"And once you go to Africa no one thinks anything of you except you come home with money—tons of money, or ivory, or things. A little goes no way."

Here she caught sight of a look of unhealthy excitement overspreading Jerry's ingenuous countenance.

"But it isn't the Navy," she cried, her tone sharpening, "where you can stand inside a paling and get pruned like a monkey tree until you're landed in an admiral. Out there you have to make your own fence and stand inside it and prune yourself. I wish to goodness gracious it was me instead of Jerry," she wound up excitedly; "Jerry's sure to be spreading himself and spoiling everything."

"Since you set so high a value upon the pruning knife," said Mrs. Devereux calmly, "it might be well if you began by using it upon your language and your exaggerated ideas. For the present I see no prospect of Jerry's amusing himself at Cairo—unless, indeed, he chose to drive donkeys; that, I

believe, is the staple pursuit of the unskilled leisure classes in that city. He may even have the coveted advantage of standing within a government fence," she went on in an iron tone, for every word that confirmed the downfall of Jerry was like a blow to Grandmother Devereux. "For from what I can hear the Cape Police will be the final destination of Jerry."

"Police!" muttered Jerry. He drew in a big breath and got white.

Jill, whose cheeks were now as hot as her blood, rushed on without a pause.

"I've just been through it all in a book. Th' asylum for failures!"

"They're educated men mostly, Jerry, well born and bred," said Mrs. Devereux, in an odd, quiet voice.

"An' as nice as anything," persisted Jill, undaunted. "And, before you can say knife, Jerry'll get into the spirit of the thing and keep on failing, too, like mad, out of pure politeness —not to seem uppish you know.—Grandmother Devereux! I can't bother about words when I'm bursting! As if I didn't know Jerry!"

"I, too, know something of Jerry, Jill."

"But I know him inside out in the dark," said Jill, with fine finality. "And there *are* other things." All at once her eyes flashed mutinously. "I've been reading. There's the Army and things in India, and Oxford. It's not in passing examinations that Jerry's ever been an ass.—We haven't any clothes to speak of—and the wine's cut off—for us, anyway. Couldn't you cut off butter and jam and puddings and manage somehow to give Jerry another proper chance before setting him off to join the police?"

There was a ringing sound in Jill's tones, and an air of indictment in her brilliant face, that fairly startled Mrs. Devereux into silence. She sat and stared at the girl.

That Jill should be heard, and her words weighed, was only to be expected. This was but justice, and one of the repellent forces against which Mrs. Devereux had invariably to steel her nerves, for when all was said and done there was never any

more than one poor bleak road which she must follow perforce as best she might. Her confirmed habit of reticence, of despotic rule; her horror of stripping fact naked, displaying her helplessness, her bound hands, and the leanness of the land before her bright-eyed pitiless judges; a hereditary cross-grained loyalty to old conventions that held her and the like of her always at arm's length from a sane simplicity of action—all these conflicting factors now joined force, causing Mrs. Devereux to pause for a long time still staring at Jill.

Justice was justice, but this tone! This face! They were both inexplicable. They were likewise both intolerable.

Mrs. Devereux's face changed abruptly. It now regarded Jill very much as a player of chess might a pawn which, suddenly eluding her hand, opened its ridiculous mouth to offer judgment upon the game.

This was a phase of Grandmother Devereux's that always effectually silenced Jill.

"The matter has been carefully gone into, Jill," she said, with icy distinctness, "and arranged to the best of my judgment. I should recommend you to take some exercise. Miss Le Cam will be here shortly. Jerry, bring your portmanteau and list of underclothing to my room in an hour."

She towered away superbly, and Jill gnashed her teeth in Jerry's blank white face.

"Sooner than give in like that to be a policeman—a peeler—I'd burn down the house," said she.

"You're a ripping brick," said Jerry, with emotion, "but I really believe she can't do any more."

"When you saw her with your own eyes gloating over heaps of gold! When we all know how she ravages the tenants."

"Perhaps——"

"Oh, perhaps you're good-natured. If you are, the Lord help you!" said Jill, in her grandmother's soft, low bass, "and damn! damn! damn good-nature! Oh, Jerry, you'd better go and count over your clothes with Grandmother Devereux, hadn't you?" added Jill, in tones of dulcet suavity, walking

with placid dignity past Honora, who appeared that moment in the doorway with her tray.

For, although Jill had a genuine affection for her dependents and a lordly sympathy with their sufferings, she had yet far too poignant a sense of pride in any sort of way to betray Grandmother Devereux. Even when she warned the farmers of the approach of their ravenous tax-gatherer, Jill permitted her information to leak out with an air of such innocent abstraction that even the astute children she deemed it her hereditary right to protect remained, many of them to their dying day, in doubt as to whether Miss Jill's benevolences were strewn "be accidence or design."

Meanwhile, having with scrupulous care sifted her facts, writhed in pitiful silence under her helplessness, and accepted the inevitable, Mrs. Devereux sat in her room with an impenetrable countenance and sewed. Jerry's linen must be mended and made neatly; she was obliged therefore to wear her great glasses, and since she had no notion of making an exhibition of herself before her household, she carefully locked her door. She had another reason also for seeking privacy. She was possessed with an inexorable determination to force the power to pray back into her rebellious heart.

It was no part of Mrs. Devereux's habit to make little of the things wherewith her Lord saw fit to burthen her. That, considering facts, would have been sheer mawkishness! The failure of Jerry was a cruel and a crushing blow, and he was the last of her line. And yet, even now, had she but the means, it might be retrieved. Jill was right—the passing of examinations was nothing to Jerry; he could pass anything.

Even now there lay before the lad in brave array the Army, the Indian Civil Service, a great University career. Every excited suggestion of Jill's fraught with cruel wisdom, had fallen like a little whip upon her grandmother's quivering back. And she had only just enough money to cast him on a second-class ticket wholesale into Africa, leaving the rest in the [illegible]ds of the Lord and a derelict connection of the family.

And Mrs. Devereux knew Jerry and the stock whereof he came!

When she could pray at all the most she could feel herself justified in praying for was a continuance of strength to cope with her beloved, but wearing family, and that Jerry might be kept honest. It was so little to ask—so little! She smiled when she thought of the great things for which she used to clamour when her first sorrow had brought her to her knees. She accepted the limitations of grace valiantly. And so much as any idea of cursing God never once entered into the mind of Mrs. Devereux, her heart was too sternly loyal, too full of *esprit de corps* for so low and craven a temptation even to assail it.

As for dying and thus making her escape, she had no notion of dying with so much on her hands. Besides, all her years and all her sorrows notwithstanding, when things went well with her and hers, this weary old woman could pant still with the desire of life. She was there, alert, alive, erect, ready at any moment to bid it welcome.

Even now, while she waited grimly until prayer should visit her and sewed her dull seams, more than once could she feel thankful that she had resisted a strong temptation, and refused, from the first, to subject Jill to the abominable tyranny of the needle.

"The child's joys may be few and meagre," she said; "but at least she'll not be called upon as I have been to prick the monotony of life into her soul with a needle, and that reminds me of Jezebel, God help her! and the magenta stockings! A year ago Jill was as unconscious of the colour of her stockings as of the colour of her eyes. These awakenings will come, however, and amongst paupers stockings are more easily dealt with than eyes. I must go through the old things. I shall dislike exceedingly to see Jill wearing Mary's clothes. Mary wore them like a queen, Jill will tear them like a great schoolboy. I can see her! Ah, well, it can't be helped."

Jill having disposed of Miss Le Cam, finding further

resistance in vain, and having a rooted objection to purposeles warfare, proceeded to gather herself up.

The process, as usual with her, was an unobtrusive though incisive one. But she sorely missed Fred as a stepping-stone to a better mind.

Jerry, rendered meek by misery, sympathetic because of the abounding pathos in his own circumstances, did, however, well enough for a substitute. Until Jill found it possible to step back into the dignity of silence, he received the sarcasms and deridings she chose to fling upon him, under her breath, with obliging magnanimity. Indeed, as she pushed on he felt it to be a not unwholesome form of penance, and by the time she had finished even felt braced to a little veiled love-making.

But in this matter, he was well aware, one had always to be most careful with Jill. She was rather ashamed of lovers. When she came across any mention of one in history she invariably skipped him. But if Jill had no sentiment, she liked being *in* things, and Jerry, besides being armed with a hereditary instinct for the ways of girls, had in his short life come across a considerable number of them, and was possessed of a receptive mind.

His emotion resolved itself, therefore, into plans which sounded practical, promised diversion, and into each of which Jill insensibly slipped. But to-day success seemed slow in coming. Jerry sighed; his eyes wistfully raked the horizon.

"Africa, you know, isn't like here," he pleaded. "Here you can take odds on things a month ahead, and mostly come out right. There you never know the minute you won't step on to something big."

"Or into the bottomless pit," said Jill, with a smile of premature wisdom.

"To try and take the wind out of a chap's sails when his wheel's sort of laid up is mean," said Jerry, with pathos.

"Then who's to remind you, I'd like to know? It's my [illegible]m belief you think things are as good-natured as yourself,

and if you grin hard enough the world'll stop swinging round to give you time to get your breath. There must be such a lot hanging round on the look-out for the same sort of thing, and you're so polite you'd never chip in at the right moment. The only thing you've got to do, it seems to me, is to keep your buttons bright and be a good policeman. Yah! I can't get used to it. You look so rich."

"One can't look like a tramp in a week—and a fellow needn't be a policemen for ever."

"I can't see where the road through a policeman leads," said Jill sadly; "that's what gravels me. However," she said suddenly remembering her duty to Jerry, "Before you can step out of him into something better, of course you'll have to be as decent a policeman as it's in you to be. And there's where I have my doubts of you."

"If you're always doubting, what's to become of me?" said Jerry hopelessly.

"Oh, Jerry, I know," she murmured, with a twinge of sincere repentance. "I know it's nagging. I know it's hitting you when you're down. But don't you see we feel—Grandmother Devereux and I—as if we'd like to sneak into our holes with our tails between our legs, and you look as if you were off to conquer the world. An admiral might be a fool to you! Can't you see how it puts one off?"

"Would you like me any better, then, if I was to whinge round with my tail between my legs?" cried Jerry, hot, furious, and ashamed.

"I'd simply detest you! Only you see I'd feel better myself in my disposition. Oh, Jerry, if you knew what it was to be tied here hand and foot, with nothing to think of but a policeman rubbing buttons, after getting used to admirals and glory! Anyway, *you'll* be stretching yourself and seeing new things."

Jill's tone might well have moved a stone. Jerry was awe-stricken. Such a voice in Jill, besides being unexpected, was pregnant with vague immensities.

Jerry's manhood rose to the occasion finely. He caught

Jill's little brown hand between both of his and straightened out the slim fingers respectfully.

"Poor old Jill," he muttered. "It *is* beastly hard lines on you. But I'll give you a jolly sight more to think of than a policeman; I swear I will. You just wait and see. And after all," he whispered soothingly, "women have always to stay at home, you know, more or less."

"And have thirteen children without turning a hair, and count the dirty clothes every Monday morning. Then I won't be a woman; 'tisn't good enough," said Jill reflectively. "I'll be a freak."

Jerry gasped and stared doubtfully.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come back to being a woman in the end," said he. "It's something about your eyes, you know."

"Bother my eyes!" said Jill, bouncing down off her branch. "Come on, let's go round every step of the place for the last time, so as not to miss a thing. You don't know the corners half as well as Fred, for all his mooning. I will say for him he attends to *you*, and you only jabber about what you're going to do yourself. This island is all I've got now to remember you in, for from this minute I'm blotting out the gun-room and the suppers of gin and sardines and admirals and everything else connected with 'em, and it will be some time before I get the right hang of you in the police. One must have something to stand people up in."

"In five years," said Jerry presently, out of a silence that seemed to him to breathe, "you'll be eighteen and have your hair up and a fringe."

"I'd sooner die."

"They all say that, but in the end they do it."

He gazed sadly at her fearless bare brow.

"I'm not they—I'm myself."

"Oh, well, we'll see! Anyway, I'll come back then," said Jerry, "just to show you," he added resolutely, yet with some vagueness.

Jill appeared, nevertheless, to understand. She stood stock still, and her eyes blazed at him.

"That's what I like," said Jill. "It's clear and distinct. It shows you've got your mind on to something, for it's hardly likely you'd be coming back here as Cape Police to disgrace us all. In five years, then, I'll be on the look-out for you. While I'm waiting I think I'd better get up an interest in Fred."

Jill's eyes were cast reflectively on the ground.

"It will keep my mind off the things I've got to blot out, you know," she added.

"I can't see at all why Fred need come in," said Jerry hastily.

"Can't you? I can then. In this place you must have something to keep you going, and nothing will induce me to get a policeman permanently fixed on my brain. It wouldn't be fair; it would spoil you altogether later on. There's enough to blot out as it is. You can't keep on blotting out things all your life."

"Oh!" said Jerry feebly.

As he seemed too stupid to take up the thread of the discourse presently Jill resumed it.

"It's really quite providential that Fred's at Eton. I couldn't have stood him lumbering round at Mr. Perrsse's."

"Then do you mean to throw me aside altogether all these years—never to think of me at all?"

There was genuine agony in Jerry's voice.

"That," said Jill composedly, "depends on yourself. You must hurry up and give me something to think of you in. I'll think of you—yourself often. Somehow one has to. But with that sort of thinking you're pretty certain to get indistinct in time, like a half-finished photograph."

"Oh, Jerry," she cried, with a sudden hard sob, huddling up against a hayrick, "you'll have to hurry. You'll have to be quick."

The night was coming on, and darkness and fear, and Jill was seized and held by the swift, overpowering sense of desolation that all the hot shining day she had so valiantly eluded.

"Don't you see, if I gave in to looking on you as police—or letting you do it—goodness only knows where we'd end. Perhaps at rat-catching. Who knows? There's nothing too bad for low thinking to bring you to. And look here, Jerry, it's just as well you should remember that all this has come to pass because you forgot *me*. We arranged that you should treat the men with unswerving justice an' no mawkish rot. And it was Amabel Lloyd, with her doddering notions, that ruined you. And I hope she's pleased with her work."

"Oh, Jill——"

"To forget my advice for that sketch!"

"Any one may forget——"

"Not if they think carefully," said Jill priggishly. "I detest dead Devereuxs myself as a rule. They make *us* seem such scrubs. But when we have stewed rabbit in the silver dish for dinner, I always think of that old Devereux who saved the King's life and died afterwards for the Protestant religion on a gridiron without a groan. It is the only possible thing that can make me swallow rabbit."

CHAPTER VIII

JUST five years afterwards Jill was standing at her glass making up her mind to sail gaily out into an unknown sea. And Jerry was on his way home. He must be at Kilknock now, the station for the island, no more than an hour or so distant.

Downstairs the table was laid and all the best plate out, shining as usual with the aggressive, complacent sheen that irritated Jill. There was generally so exceedingly little to put on it. But to-night was a night of exceptions; a banquet was being made ready. There was soup made from a chicken, filched from the great market basket which carried to the mainland all the produce of Knockeen, and soles, delicate and white. Jill wondered thoughtfully if she so much as remembered the taste of a sole, and oh, how disastrously familiar was she with that of herrings! And there was a little

delicious brown leg of mutton that had been waiting these four years in the hills for Jerry's home-coming. For every year a lamb had been set sacredly aside for the return of Jerry. There was gooseberry tart also, and a great bowl of cream.

Now as Jill was beating her brush abstractedly against the table she sniffed up savoury scents with honest pleasure, and reflected gratefully that with Jerry and Fred at home the leg could not possibly last for a week, as legs were always supposed to last her and Grandmother Devereux.

Then she turned her eyes to the glass again to look at her hair. It was dusky hair that had often struck Jill as being wanting in imagination. No matter how wild the rest of her might be, it lay close and prim and neat always. Amidst riot, misrule, and chaos, this uneventful hair could cling cool and unruffled around her small head. But until this moment she had never dwelt very particularly upon it, supposing it would be all right when the time came, just in the same way as her scragginess would, at the crucial moment, fill out and disappear.

This sort of intimate information Jill gathered, not, as may be supposed, from her grandmother, but from the mainland people when they had her in to make remarks on, and it had provided her on occasions with some fitful interest. But now in the most extraordinary way her hair had suddenly become a sort of landmark in her life, and an eminently unsatisfactory one, for wrestle with it as she would, she could not twist it to her will. It was so soft and lank it went to nothing.

Jill pinned three highly barbered ladies one after the other to the big dimity pincushion, and made conscientious copies from each of them. But the result was in every case deplorable. She screwed the ladies into a little ball and pelted it at the cat's nose, then paused to get herself on to a new train of thought, and presently catching her smooth soft sweep of hair in a handful, she shut her eyes and rolled it into a decorous prim little ring at the back of her head. "Perhaps it knows best itself what it wants," she reflected, and apparently it did.

For it was a little head, every inch of it game, that could afford to show all its clear-cut outlines, and relieved from the tension of its parting, the soft short hairs in the front reared themselves up into a little shadowy crown.

"I thought," said Jill, with a relieved sigh—"dear me! I thought I was going to be a fright after all."

Fully satisfied on this point, she turned to pull in and pick out a little short skimpy bodice which lay on the bed beside another of a more ample make.

The stuff was *châle*, made obviously upon an eighteenth-century loom, so leisurely seemed the convulvuli strewn athwart it, and of so quaint a cottage-garden pink, while the ground, once white, was now of a pure rich ivory. And around the neck of this short-waisted bodice ran a row of tiny ribbon rosettes of the old true pink hue, and they looked like baby roses just a little crumpled. The bodice had been made a century ago or so for another Mary, one generation older than her from whose store Jill had hitherto drawn her supplies, for the younger Mary's dresses being all torn to tatters, Mrs. Devereux had to go back a step for spoil.

A modish skirt and bodice, as island modes went, had been constructed out of the amplitude of the older Mary's skirt; she had been a stately, long-limbed woman, and they knew better in those days than to snip lavishly into good cloth. The little prim opening at the neck was fitted to the indefinite state and requirements of a growing girl.

Jill was nearer eighteen than seventeen, had still the pure cool look of extreme youth, and was in no sort of haste about her physical development. She was a thin lath of a thing; in her grandmother's sight far more boy than girl. But Jill herself was sick to death of indefiniteness, she was restless with hankerings, and the village dressmaker appealed to nothing in her mood. So she had herself marched off to the old chest and unearthed the little short bodice, and directly she put it on, she felt as though some want were filled. And now her hair off her mind, she put it on again, and made it a little

longer-waisted with an old pink sash she had unearthed likewise from the chest.

Then without stint or haste she looked at herself. She set the glass on a chair, on the bed, and on a stool in turns, and twirled round and round reflectively on one leg.

"I'm ripping," she said at last. "I'm as nice as anything, and thank goodness there's been nothing left out in the cold. It would be awful to be just roughed off in a hurry with things to hide. Think of scrambled-up ears and a sleek head!"

Looking at herself in the glass had an odd effect upon Jill. She felt dizzy and flopped down on a chair.

"Dear me! If I had turned out a fright," she sighed, "with Jerry not two miles off!"

Jill's sensation of faint-heartedness was, however, fleeting, and there was no false shame about her.

She was panting to show herself, all thrilled with her new discovery, to any one. If Jerry were still two miles off, at least Fred was on the premises. She ran down, her cheeks pink, her lips scarlet and apart—ran almost into the arms of Grandmother Devereux, who, excited, strained, and nervous, had risen to her feet at the quick rush of young feet, and stood with head stretched eagerly forward catching after her sight.

"Jill," she cried, "do you mean to say that's you—you?"

"It's me," said Jill, with frank triumph, "and indeed you're not half so much surprised as I was."

There was a tightening at Mrs. Devereux's heart. Here, indeed, was something new and strange, and, with Jerry at the very gate, rather appalling. Mrs. Devereux did not feel equal to any fresh emotions, so she sat down firmly and began to scold.

"There's a time for all things, Jill. Kindly cease mumming, and go and get ready."

"I'm ready," cried Jill. "I'm really grown-up. I can't ungrow over again."

Her grandmother's eyes, now steadily focussed, calmly drank Jill in. Her face altered slowly, and her hands fell together.

Of a sudden Jill stood first on one foot and then on the other in a pitiful young way, and all her bright face protested.

"Grandmother Devereux, you're surely not going to spoil everything, and begin praying for me? You don't want to make me absolutely hopeless—you don't surely, when I really feel ready for anything?"

"That certainly would be a singular effect for prayer to take, Jill," said her grandmother, with a grim smile. "And far be it from me to rob you of any of your courage. You'll want it all," she mused under her breath, "with that face. Stand there in the light, Jill, and let me look at you properly."

All that Jill demanded was a fair field. With a regal smile she stepped boldly into the middle of a sunbeam, and threw down her glove to the world.

"God help the child! God help the child!" seemed to be singing in Mrs. Devereux's ears; but, given the time, she could pray as silently as she could do all other things.

The perfect oval of Jill's small, pure, petulant face seemed to be set in an excellent frame of golden light. Her eyes spoke of heaven, her mouth of earth. She looked not unlike a beautiful choir-boy who, directly he has sung his Gloria and ravished the best out of all the listening sea of souls, is firmly resolved upon mischief.

"You look rather theatrical, Jill," remarked Mrs. Devereux severely, "and I have no doubt you'll make hosts of enemies, but you won't be passed over. And in spite of yourself, in the end, I really believe you'll have to behave yourself decently. The day will come, or I'm vastly mistaken, when you'll be thanking God for that Devereux back. Don't jig about in the sun, child. You look heathenish."

Jill took one step out of the golden light; then she halted to listen, and forthwith skipped back again. Fred was at the door, and she had the family dramatic instinct. But just now she was moved to deeper issues even than the ancestral gift disclosed, and the next second her one desire was to keep her new self fresh and first-hand for Jerry. It was too late, however—Fred was in the room. And, after all, nothing

was quite so delicious to Jill as surprising any one by outdoing herself.

She turned slowly round for inspection, lifted her hand again in its fine, unconscious, glove-throwing attitude, and laughed softly.

Fred fetched up sharp, and stood transfixed before her.

Mrs. Devereux, who had not seen Fred, was also moved to grave appreciation.

"It will cost very little to dress her," she murmured half-aloud, for Mrs. Devereux was more disturbed in this moment than she would have cared to own. "Odd, too; our family has, as a rule, been rather expensive in the matter of dressing."

"'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' perhaps," said Jill, flouncing out of her sunbeam into a chair. "Oh, well, it is delightful to forget reduced circumstances, even for a moment," she added, with restored good-humour. "Even from an economic point of view, Fred, don't you think me worth a remark?" she demanded blandly.

"You're not made to be made remarks about," he said, with slow, consuming wrath, looking down scornfully at his own immaculate clothes, which, in spite of their cut, hung but scurvily about his lank shapelessness.

He was not thinking of this, however; but of his last tailor's bills and the imperial suavity with which they were received and discharged.

"If she'd flare up or swear, or do anything reasonable, one wouldn't mind; but everlasting charity with a high hand—and then to say that about Jill!"

Fred took hold of a book and stared stolidly at a photograph he had hated from birth, and wished anything would swallow him. Jill understood partly, and, feeling a responsibility in regard to Fred, she went and sat down beside him.

"Fred," she wheedled, "aren't I nice?"

"Oh, Jill," he said softly, "I'm glad you look—just as you do look. You'd hate to look different."

The next minute, in a slouching sort of way she hoped he had forgotten, Fred left the room. Jill would have liked

dearly to box his ears—he was so useful there as a point whereupon to fix her floating mind. Failing him she looked over at Grandmother Devereux; something in the set of that lady's head struck her sharply. She stared in a leisurely way. She was restless and full of herself and Jerry, with occasional flashes of Fred. She felt constrained to say something.

"To look at you now," she said at last, her chin held up in both palms, "one simply can't understand how you could ever sit down quietly to have thirteen children."

Mrs. Devereux turned and glanced at Jill. She was disturbed and restless herself and found silence difficult. In an odd sort of way she respected the girl's mood.

"You forget, Jill, that I bore my children at a time when the self-seeking and restlessness of these latter times had not yet laid waste the earth."

"Still, you must always have had a great deal of common sense," said Jill thoughtfully.

"I believe you'll get on in the world, child," resumed her grandmother presently. "You have no heart."

Jill received this remark without offence, but with some glimmer of a new understanding. She turned it over in her mind calmly.

"The one thing about me," said she, "is that I'm well finished, not just thrown together with things left out. If a heart is an absolute necessity, it's pretty certain I must have one. I'll begin to dig for it at my first spare minute. Oh! oh! Jerry!"

Jerry had got off the car and run across the short cut through the garden. He was now standing in the French window, his eyes on Jill. He was panting a little, and looked as brown as a bronze god and nearly as beautiful.

"My boy! my boy! my boy!" said Grandmother Devereux, but Jill said nothing.

And then Jerry had both her hands in his, and he was wondering if he might kiss her.

"Don't," she said, with quick premonition, "oh, don't. It's—it's quite different."

Jerry said something indistinct about the train, and being late, and Larry the groom, and the next instant he was up the stairs after Fred, and Grandmother Devereux gave one extraordinary sob and stopped dead.

Jill turned to look at her. But she did not seem to matter very much. Nothing seemed to matter now but Jerry and herself, and she felt shaken all to pieces. Altogether she was surprised at herself. She stood up, shook out her skirts, and went into the hall to look things round fairly.

Honora tottering in with a tray, having in her emotion spilt the currant jelly, recalled Jill to practical matters.

"Now, Honora," she said, scooping the jelly up off the polished floor, "this comes of having too much heart and letting it go. From what I can see, heart's a sort of thing to be avoided, unless you get the whip-hand of it right from the start, which to judge by this jelly you haven't. Jerry, come and speak to Honora," she cried, looking up at him from her knees; "she's spilt the last pot of jelly in your honour, which is what might be called wasted affection. I couldn't even imagine having so much heart that you're driven to spill things to ease its overflow."

"Upon my word, Jill!"

Jill looked up to see her grandmother, who knew nothing of purposeless flippancy, staring blankly. All that was left her to do was to make the best of the matter. She jumped up, laughing nervously.

"Honora's been anointing Jerry's feet with currant jelly in the joy of her heart," she explained airily, "and I've been delivering a homily upon heart and its overflow."

"Suppose we go into dinner like human beings," said Mrs. Devereux.

"Jerry," said Jill, when they had reached the joint, "used you often to lie out under the African moon and think of hill mutton?"

Not being the least hungry, and feeling rather irritated in face of this strange fact, Jill was impelled to mock at something.

Jerry, however, having to contend both with hunger and emotion, felt a little injured.

"One way and another there's a good deal to think of in Africa besides hill mutton, more especially when you have to lie out under the moon."

"You must be a good deal changed all the same if mutton didn't come in—mutton flavoured with us, you know. You always did think of things in an interesting sort of way."

"Supposing one was too tired to think at all?" said Jerry, his eyes eloquent in a general sort of way.

"One is never too tired to think of oneself sorrowfully, you know," said Jill, serenely scanning him, "and, we'll hope, to say his prayers. And so his thoughts being both interesting and improving, he gets on in a picturesque sort of way."

"I'm precious glad you don't even know what getting on means, Jill."

He gave an unobtrusive but conscious sigh. Jill laughed irreverently. She was finding out things in his face that disturbed her.

"Don't I? Horny-handed toil, with honest sweat and a meek, bowed back.—So long as you keep all the signs and tokens inside as you do, getting on at least keeps you awake and alive and amused. You just try standing still for a change."

"You know even less of standing still," said Jerry, with a hasty look at her and as hasty a lapse back into his dinner.

The look, oddly enough, turned Jill's eyes upon Fred for further information, he averted his precipitately and asked for potatoes.

Although absorbed and abstracted in matters purely personal to herself, and longing for silence, Mrs. Devereux preserved an essentially right mind, which revolted insensibly from any atmosphere alien to its principles. Becoming aware of some untoward demoralisation going on in her family circle, mechanically she turned her attention upon Jill, and forthwith caught the increasingly flippant note in that young lady's remarks, together with its devastating effect upon the rest of the table.

"Enough is as good as a feast," said she in her politest tone, "and after all flippancy is but a mean substitute for wit. Fred, you have no gravy."

Fred was not in the least in need of gravy, but he passed up his plate hurriedly. Jerry, grown calmer with travel and the years, embarked courageously upon deck anecdote and the humour of the first mate.

Jill alone accepted the snub with an entirely equable mind. She was rather glad of it for a diversion. The things in Jerry's face were surprising her immensely. There were lines and creases, and odd little bits of age strewn everywhere. They astonished her, but not half so much as a patient square look she could never have expected of the like of Jerry.

"He'd have been a lieutenant now," she thought, "and all these lines and things would mean something. They'd all be recognised—and pay. But they're thrown away on Africa; sucked up and forgotten in that abominable soil. Just wasted—increment—that's the word."

Jill was severely practical, but there were tears burning behind her eyes. There was one thing that completely baffled her in Jerry. There was a little depressed pinch about his nostrils, that took from the frankness of his bearing, and in his eyes an over-alert, over-alive shrewd old gleam.

When they left the dining-room, almost involuntarily Jill made for the hall door. She needed the action of air and light upon her sensations, which struck her as being stuffy. She turned suddenly to see what Jerry was about; she could hear him breathing.

"I always meant to come back in May," he said, feeling all at once apologetic under her clear eyes. "I knew exactly how everything would look—everything but you," he added upon a lower key.

The calm of Jill's face confused him; he stared therefore at Fred.

"I shouldn't have believed any chap could have improved as much in the time," he thought, with a lordly generosity.

"Considering everything he's wonderful. But hang it all, can't he move off a little farther?"

There was too much vagueness in the air for Jill, it made her feel limp. And there were volumes to be finding out.

Odd as it may seem, not one amongst them knew anything definite about Jerry's position. His letters for two years after his departure had, indeed, been the soul of candour. Jerry abhorred Africa, and he had said so without reserve or stint. He scorned and banned the place up hill and down. And his letters, each in its turn, had fallen like a blight upon the silent house, while Mrs. Devereux's increasingly suave rejoicing in Fred's brilliant success was growing absolutely unbearable. And then one day Jill gathered herself up and wrote a letter to Jerry. And every line in it thrashed him like a flail. But there came no answer to that amazing production. Since then Jerry wrote always to his grandmother, and dealt mainly in generalities. And there were no other means of reliable information concerning Jerry, except through Jerry himself.

The relative to whom he had been consigned was a Devereux, whose family had married into the Poores. And if the gift of imagination in that branch of the Devereuxs was well-developed, that of the Poores had outgrown all bounds. This gentleman, to boot, drank badly. Thus, whenever a shaky scrawl reached her from her florid kinsman, flaming with Jerry's exploits, Mrs. Devereux remarked pleasantly that poor old Ananias was growing worse every year and quietly burnt it. Jerry's position remained therefore a delicious mystery.

Jill threw off the clogging vagueness in the mental atmosphere, straightened herself briskly, and felt the texture of Jerry's coat.

"It's exactly right," she murmured, "just the same as your father's. Your father's were the first evening clothes that ever appealed to the whole of me. The clothes of the men across the water don't let you rest somehow; they're disturbing. You're always wanting to fill up little depressions in their backs, or else give them an inch more breathing-space all round. As for Fred's——." Fred had a miserable way of getting himself

forgotten and then making Jill feel sorry for him. "They're awful. It's not worth while having that sort of thing decent at Oxford, he says, so he got one somewhere cheap."

Jerry flashed a look across her at the other man, who was now of a sickly puce hue. Jerry's lips silently whistled. But having attacked life young he knew pretty well, for one in the early twenties, in how far primitive emotions may not shape a woman's course until her heart has taught her subtlety, and reflecting that clothes might be an excellent stepping stone to this new Jill, he set the discomposing purple visage of Fred hastily aside and seized his opportunity.

"The things would be sure to be all right, I suppose," said he modestly. "I went to my father's tailor."

"I say, Jerry, it isn't credit?"

"Well, no; if I wanted credit I'd hardly go to Punt," said Jerry, with a reminiscent grin." For the sheer credit of the family Punt had lately cost him a cool two hundred. Indeed, Jerry was already finding a father a somewhat costly luxury. "But, Jill, I'd never have suspected you of a morbid horror of legitimate debt. You look as if you could take things reasonably."

"There are two sides to reason—the side of the reasoner and that of the reasonee. Tailors are generally reasonees, aren't they? I have a fellow feeling for tailors. But I wasn't so much thinking of tailors in the light of human beings as of you. Money can't be so new to you still," she pursued artfully, "that you'd really quite enjoy paying?"

"Well, I wouldn't go as far as that," said Jerry modestly, "but I like buying. I've got a few little things upstairs. I wonder if I've got the right thing for Grandmother Devereux. It's a diamond sort of——"

"Diamond!" murmured Jill.

"She's rather old for coloured stones, isn't she?"

"Oh, I was only thinking that getting on in a mild way meant just meat every day, and an odd suit or so."

"But I couldn't have come home on that. Besides, don't you remember what you told me?"

His voice irritated her. There was a sort of plaintive wail in it, and one doesn't always like to be reminded of things. She had, as it happened, been awake many a windy night thinking of the style of that unanswered letter, and inventing causes for the silence that had fallen upon Jerry, and now, in spite of her, she was coupling both the letter and the silence with the pinched look about Jerry's nose and the untimely sharpness in his eyes.

Jill rarely regretted any action, but she hated having done things in the wrong way,—and now this voice, and Fred glaring at her out of the shadows!

It was almost wholly upon Fred's account that she had written the baleful epistle, and he was exceedingly ungrateful, and very much in the way. She knew, as a matter of fact, that he was blissfully unaware of the letter's existence, and consumed by an overpowering desire to relieve them of his society, but it did her good to blame Fred. Fred, indeed, was never more convenient than when Jerry was beside her taking things rather too much for granted.

"Really, Jerry, one would think that I was nothing but memories of YOU. There are plenty of other things to remember—growing up, and the dulness of the island, and the increasing virulence in Grandmother Devereux's raids on the tenants."

Fred was about to escape when Jill suddenly switched him into the conversation.

"And Fred's successes. Fred is fairly speckled with honours. Fred, reel them out in their order, do."

"I know them by heart," said Jerry, with warm affection; "and I'm prouder of them than all of you put together. For I know how easy it is to miss things just at the start," he said, in a quiet uncomplaining voice that touched Jill, just exactly as Jerry meant that it should touch her.

"And they're just the things you'll never catch up again for the rest of your life. Fred, why aren't you smoking?"

"Oh, I don't smoke once in a blue moon."

Jerry, thrilling with Jill and the generosity of success, was yet beset by horrid suspicions in regard to Fred.

"I don't know a thing about you, really," he said. "You'd never run to books alone with your girth. What do you *do*?"

"Oh, I walk a lot. I haven't really so much time, you see. I coach a bit in the term, and out of it sometimes."

"Fred does nothing but ladle up honours," said Jill, in her cool way. "He's the delight of his masters' hearts, and spends his leisure hours coaching fools. He's miles above idle gossip or amusing himself. He comes home every time with a new honour, and not a word to tell you about it. Thank goodness," said she, with fervour, pausing to regard Jerry, "you know something about amusing yourself, and in a nice expensive proper sort of way I feel sure. I hope you'll teach Fred. But perhaps, after all," she said artfully, "perhaps it's only look."

"Come down to the beach and I'll tell you.

"Fred, aren't you coming?" she called back over her shoulder. But Fred had vanished.

"I'll tell him presently. Come, Jill!"

Jill's feet were fairly running away with her, but of a sudden she stood stock still. Struggle as she would against it, Jill was literally tracked by a fear of being unfair to Grandmother Devereux. This unfortunate lady, indeed, always did seem to be cropping up just to spoil things.

"Grandmother Devereux!" ejaculated Jill. "She'll be wanting to hear." Her face and voice and gesture all protested hard, but her conscience would have its say.

Jerry laughed blithely.

"Now I know that I'm really at home again—and that you're not changed in the least. You're just the same, Jill. I'll tell her everything later on. To-night you have the first right. It was of telling you I used to be thinking out under the African moon, and not of hill mutton. Besides, I've never answered your last letter yet, and it was written three years ago."

"A person with a great mind would never have alluded to that letter," said Jill feebly. "I doubt even if Fred would."

"He wouldn't certainly, if a person with a great mind wouldn't. Fred's mind, I take it, is pretty roomy. But I can't very well help alluding to it since it was my beginning, my anno domini. I date everything from the day I got that letter. Jill, here's our old tussock, and thank goodness the sea's snoozing. Sit down and listen.

"You see, it was pretty beastly when I went out first and, oh well, I suppose I was of an open disposition and used to give way to my howlings. It was your fault. I defy any one to howl on Grandmother Devereux's bosom, so naturally one went to you.

"Never to howl on my bosom!"

"Well, not literally. But one insensibly went to you. And in the intervals of your denunciations one could always get in a lot of one's own woes. And Africa was lonely and dull and provincial—or, smarting as I was with failure and disappointment, I thought so then—and so I got into the habit of flinging myself on to paper, like the selfish young whelp I was. You did quite right to send that letter."

"Oh, Jerry, did you smart badly? Was it awful?"

"Oh, board ship was right enough. It takes time to feel what failing really means. There were several of us in the same hobble. But we hadn't got the thing fairly into our bones then; so far, indeed, the change was more or less of a spree. Our lungs were expanding with the sense of space."

Jill drew in a turbulent breath.

"Ah, you were always hankering after space," said Jerry, with an odd laugh. "Well, where was I? Oh, we were a lot of idle young fools breathing bigger draughts of air and drinking more whiskey probably than we'd been used to. We had free hands and the scent of a new world in our nostrils; and at first we were right enough on the whole and fairly happy. It's when you've been in the new place for some time and have got used to the new sounds and fairly sick of the sights that you begin to realise what failure really means. When we settled down to the collar properly all the exuberance wore off. Hours, and days, and weeks, went by and nothing happened.

You went every day to the office;—in obedience to your instructions I held out against the police; besides there wasn't a vacant post then. You did your dull work and talked to dull people, and swapped notes with another poor beast of a disillusioned failure or so; you read old news and had fierce exploded opinions hurled at you. In short, you wallowed in narrow provincialism with a taint on it, and yet nothing happened any more than it happens in this island. A Kaffir boy blacked your boots badly, and with the irritation of the place on you, you swore in a depraved way in which you'd never swear at home; another spilt your beer, another got drunk. There was never any variation in the habits of the Devereux cousin: he was always drunk by eleven o'clock and his lies were without form and void."

"Is that Africa?" said Jill, in a choked voice.

"That's Africa for scores of fellows in a small way. And then one morning you wake up and the poison of the knowledge of failure is working in your blood like a fever. Talk of England and a November fog! It's only in or about the torrid zone that a man can despair properly. Some of 'em go mad, drink gets hold of more, brawls take a few, gambling the rest."

"What are the women doing?" said Jill, upon a sagacious instinct.

"The women! Oh, I don't think the place agrees very well with women. They don't make you sit up, somehow. Grandmother Devereux would be the making of provincial Africa."

"Wouldn't I do?"

"Well, no; you might give rise to ill-feeling in the community. Besides, we'd hardly have the nerves for you. Grandmother Devereux would be a safer tonic. Well, as I was saying, the air over there makes you slack, and then you begin to slop over on to paper and worry the lives out of women. Unless that phase is nipped in the bud you're done for. It's a flat-footed sort of meanness, you know—you can't rise out of it. You nipped it, Jill, neatly."

Jill's lips were trembling, and she looked distressingly like a woman, a real soft sweet woman who can suffer. Jerry was appalled. He had never before seen Jill quite like this. His agitation was, however, premature. The next instant Jill was herself again, her afflicting womanliness in the background.

"If I say that that letter has made me feel degraded, and more than once, too, perhaps you'll have decent feeling enough not to speak of it again."

"Jill, you're beyond me. It was a ripping letter."

"In principle, perhaps. I'm not imbecile. It's the form I'm thinking of."

"Consider your age."

"One doesn't care to have been shivering on the brink of a fish-wife at any age. I like to do things in the best way."

"But if you reach your aim?"

"That," she admitted, "is satisfactory, certainly. But it's not everything. You mightn't take me on sight to be as ignorant as Miss Le Cam herself, and yet I am, and it means constantly always slurring over something, always blundering into the right road. It gives any fool who knows such a pull over you. But go on with yourself, and we'll take the letter as read."

"Well, then, driven by circumstances, I determined to find another outlet for my susceptibilities than English composition, and in thinking things over I really found that torrid village not good enough. Cousin Devereux had grown monotonous, and there were three more Service off-scourings besides myself to raise the tone of the society, and give it the necessary touch of romance. There was no use for me in the place, so I collected my traps and tramped further. It was a somewhat prolonged walking tour; but on the road I think I learnt a thing or two. Your first impulse when you find yourself sweating and struggling in a crowd is to hold your nose and turn a hose on it. A crowd at the first shock is unsavoury, and the habit of the bath, physical, moral, or mental, breeds arrogance. But it's really far better to accustom your nose to its environments, and whilst always minding your own business, to take notes on that of

other people. You'll find presently you can't get on without the crowd. You'll want every unit in it. The great thing is to grip on tight to all the material you can lay hold of—that is if you're going to build, and not be built with. Sinners make every bit as good bricks and mortar as saints; depends altogether upon how you use them. Besides, until one knows what has determined their course it's just as presumptuous to judge a saint as a sinner. He'll probably call for quite as lenient treatment at your hands. Using up people for your advantage directly, and their's indirectly, expands the mind and makes for a spirit of Christian tolerance. Jill, am I boring you? Maundering on aloud is a relief after a long silence, and you can't think how jolly it is here with you. How nice your frock feels—it's just you, and it smells of lavender. But tell me if I bore you."

"You don't bore me—you're new and interesting. I always thought somehow you'd have become a mere brick yourself."

"So I should have—only for that—circumstance you know."

"One galvanic shock might set you off," said Jill hurriedly, "but it wouldn't keep you going."

"Success is exciting, you see, and you have to keep your eyes open for opportunities. Once you're off, you can't very well stand still. I got my first opportunity through a saint and the next through a sinner. I had the further spur of two angels to urge me on and the luck to save a devil from a watery grave. He succumbed later to pneumonia and left me £200."

"The angels were girls, I suppose?" said Jill abruptly.

"They were. How did you know?"

"By your face. You're coming back in bits. Did you use them, too?"

"Well, yes. They liked it."

"Dear me, yes. And you must have decorations for the corner-stones."

Jerry smiled. Jill's face was flinty.

"Go on."

"I was pretty good always at mathematics and mechanics, you know, and I happened to invent a crane that answered better than any other they knew of. For that I got some money down and a share in a mine which turned up trumps. It's still turning up trumps, and in the meantime I've netted thirty thousand pounds."

Jerry spoke in a frank, youthful way, and he was touching Jill's dress gently. Jill said nothing, but her lips closed tightly.

Jerry was singularly attractive as he sat on the tussock, and the girl's heart quivered and thrilled with new notes, and her mouth grew tender and sweet.

"Oh, Jerry, I'm glad!"

She stood up and looked out on the sea, breathing a little hard, and then with her old gesture she threw out her arms. Jerry remembered it and stood up laughing and the two went together towards the house.

"Oh, Jill, it's good to be with you again."

"It's good to have you, Jerry."

But the moment of triumph was already over for Jill and she was suffering a vivid reaction. Her piercing eyes must keep peering; her vigilant hard brain probing.

"You went away a mere good-natured fool," said she at last, "and you've come back—Catholic spirit. It's the more finished state. It's what I've always longed to behold, but, oh, Jerry!" she said—Jerry took her arm and held it hard; how well he knew this mood!—"Jerry, I wish I hadn't prayed against good-nature. And after all, there's something rather nice in foolishness. I wish I had written that letter differently. It's made you too like me. Oh, don't growl; I understand you quite. You're immensely improved. And you'd never bore me. Fred does to the point of distraction, and his slouch is unbearable. But, Jerry, I think on the whole he's bigger inside than either of us, and better finished too."

"Well, obviously," said Jerry coolly. "He's so big inside that he's safe to have a—hum—excuse me, but a—hell of a time, especially with women. When I think of what Fred's

gone through these five years between you and Grandmother Devereux, my blood runs cold."

"Grandmother Devereux and me!"

"Oh, no one's to blame. It's in the sheer nature of things. If a fellow's a cut above a real good woman with an intellect and tonic properties, in size inside, you know, he's completely at her mercy. It's the foolish ones of the earth who never go hopelessly wrong about the best quality of chap!"

"How dare you say such things?"

"Jill, I'm not the least afraid of you. What I say is gospel truth."

"A minute ago you looked so—so metallic, I was thinking of tapping you to hear you clink—and to dare to pretend to understand Fred better than I do!"

"Nothing but love would make you or the like of you understand a chap like Fred."

"How do you know I don't——"

"Because you don't understand him."

Jerry brought her up very short, and looked down at her with happy, shining eyes, and he laughed softly.

"Fred's a boy," she said contemptuously.

"He's been too much down on his luck to have been a boy these ten years. I say, there's Grandmother Devereux waiting. Jill, I had to tell you first, and yet she'll be the gladder of the two. It would never strike her that I could clink."

"I'm not sure that I mightn't clink myself if I had anything to clink with."

"Oh, well, we'll clink together. I wish Grandmother Devereux wouldn't look like a gravestone. There's something in this place that petrifies everything but you."

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Jerry left her, Jill paused with her foot on the first step, and turned suddenly back into the moonlit dusk. Immensely proud as she was of Jerry, triumphing with all her heart in his triumph, she was yet passionately disappointed, and all her old longings to see him in his uniform were tearing at her heart.

"He'd look fine, he'd look fine!" she told herself over and over again. "And now he can command himself it's only fair to suppose he could command other people."

If Jerry could only have remained under the discipline absolutely necessary to his constitution, she would never have been called upon to write that letter, and would not now be made miserable on account of it.—Jill hated any hindrance to her rare delights.

Why, this night of all others, should she be forced into noticing the glitter in Jerry's eyes, the paltry pinch-in of his nostrils? They had probably escaped both his other interested observers. Why should she be absolutely certain that the letter was largely accountable for these unnatural defects, and the indefinite mischief she had a horrid confidence was still going on in Jerry. Jill's intuitions were often cruelly true, and she was generally in a painful state of revolt against them.

It was lonely out in the night, however, and even now she had her suspicions of the darkness. It brought Fred to her mind in a soothing light. Once Fred got fairly on one's mind, she mused, he was apt to work there in a dogged, insistent sort of way that had to be reckoned with.

Instead of brooding out in the night it struck her that she might now be talking to him. It would have much the same chastening effect as the moonlight, and be more sociable.

Jerry's remarks had indeed made Fred rather unpleasantly clear to Jill. For a great number of reasons for some time past it had been her habit to keep Fred as indistinct in her mind

as she could. He was the one subject she preferred to keep vague, into which she tacitly declined to enter. It offered too wide a field for speculation. She had an uncomfortable conviction that she might possibly get lost in Fred. She shied away from this humiliating reflection, and felt glad to think that Fred after all was only a boy, and the academical success of the family.

Upon this, of late years, if Fred happened to be at home, for some unfathomable reason she would go forthwith to look him up, and be rather particularly nice to him. If he were away, she probably wrote him a letter, which reflected something of the naïve disorder going on in her mind. This course of conduct had conspired to make her increasingly and inestimably dear to the guileless young man.

Fred had got into the way of marching forward, his eyes upon some aim, his wits in travail with the means to reach it. When he halted, therefore, to look about him, he was generally dazed a little, and sensitive with the poignant, unreasoning, unreasonable sensitiveness of an absent-minded boy. His affection for one woman insensibly filled him with a great amazement in regard to all, and frequently made him ache badly.

What added materially to Fred's wonder, in face of the Great Problem, was being himself the pensioner of a lady of an imperial mind and limited income. It seemed to Fred's simple understanding that it would have been much easier for Grandmother Devereux herself if she were to pluck the sting out of her magnificent charity. Even if it did not happen to beat for him, she had a mighty heart, and the strength of her brain, he felt with a shudder, was incontestable fact. That she should act in direct defiance of both appeared to Fred so whimsically illogical that he was forced to set the anomaly down to the score of *his* ignorance and *her* sex.

Thus, between Mrs. Devereux and Jill, was Fred being launched into life with a blind belief in the goodness of women, but a confused doubt as to their sanity. This was unfair to Fred, for in a world composed largely of women it

left him unarmed at many points, and in spite of his reason in no sort of way did it tend to mitigate his sufferings.

Jill watched him for several minutes through the open schoolroom window before she spoke. It was only when Fred looked at her as though she were an unknown quantity, and went on with his work patiently, or betrayed his density by a blank misunderstanding of some salient proposition, or else looked disappointed at nothing in his exasperating way, that Fred ever bored her.

Vague speculations upon the innumerable things that might, but for his impassive resistance to progress, be done to improve Fred had an irresistible attraction for her, and she had a genuine respect for his brow. It looked square and strong and as though it had a knowledge and understanding of the meaning of pushing on, certainly denied to the rest of his body. Even at his dullest moments, moreover, Fred could sometimes startle her into attention, and this with so much vacant time on her hands was in Jill's estimation an invaluable quality.

Possibly having heard ever since she could remember Fred alluded to on the mainland as "Poor Fred," and being aware that on the island he was known by the name of "Eyah now, poor masther Fred, God help him!" may have insensibly influenced Jill's judgment.

At the present moment, however, he was especially impressed on her mind by Jerry's frank recognition of his gifts; for Jill could even admire better to the clapping of hands.

Fred's profile as she now saw it against the meagre light of one guttering candle reminded her somehow of her own sensations in the presence of Grandmother Devereux's stone-wall face. Of a sudden Jill's sympathies became active. She vaulted lightly over the low window-sill, plumped down into a chair beside Fred, and put both hands over the letter he was writing.

For one instant Fred's face flickered up and he looked almost as nice as Jerry. The next the fleeting flicker went out.

"Ah, of course you'd be wanting to talk of Jerry," he said, with a short laugh.

"Well, of course, and so would you. Fred, tell me just exactly what you think of him."

"What does my opinion matter?"

"It matters quite a lot. Do go on."

"It's just like your own, then. Jerry's got over his failure like a man. He's turned up trumps, and he'll win in the end hands down."

Jill was obviously waiting for more.

"He can shake even the memory of difficulties off his feet like dust," said Fred in the pause. This fact, as it happened, had called out all Fred's admiration, and unqualified commendation is hardly an easy thing to offer up on the shrine of an inevitable rival.

Jill's eyes shone finely.

"Oh, that's just knowing how to be successful."

Fred winced unobtrusively. Jill, still staring at his profile, was aware of this fact, but she was thinking of Jerry, and so she continued, her emotions quite undisturbed:

"You can see the difficulties, though, in his improvement. He's more set, you see. Even in his uniform he sometimes looked sort of wobbly. Fred, in what precise way do you think Jerry's gone off?" She looked serenely out of the window, but her voice was anxious.

"Gone off? He hasn't gone off at all. He's gone on."

Fred's tone brought back some faint interest in his person upon the part of Jill. She turned to look at him.

"Oh, that's all you know about it, is it? He happens to be gone off. But I don't believe I could explain to you how; you wouldn't understand."

"Really, Jill——"

"You needn't be so touchy. I'm not sure that your not being able to understand isn't rather to your credit. You're a cut above Jerry and me, so Jerry said just now. Being a cut below you is what makes Jerry and me so clear to each other."

a self-respecting look about him. He'd be relentless in the path of duty. Is he an usher too?"

"Yes. He's now plying his trade at Rugby."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry for his enemies. If only they knew, the boys would soon stop being troutlets in a pool. Fred, to think of you writing here when we're all so excited! You must have a wonderful mind."

"It's being an usher, perhaps."

"Fred, how dare you?"

"Really, Jill——"

"You'd drive one to say anything. When a person could sweep up a whole family with a broom if he liked, and make it howl like a dog—what awful language the Bible uses!—or make it sit up like a nine-pin for the rest of its days with a single flick of the truth, to be sitting here in the corner with one candle! Now that's what makes genius so unpopular."

"But, Jill——"

Jill glanced at him as though she wondered what on earth he wanted in the conversation. It was a way she had inherited from Grandmother Devereux.

"If genius *will* slouch along in the dark, if it doesn't come under the eye of the police, at any rate it'll be left in the dark. It ought, at least, to have the courage of its opinion—of *itself*."

"If there's any genius to be seen, there are plenty of eyes to see it."

"You can't expect them to be the eyes of its own family, I suppose. And catch you giving your groaning family any sensible cue."

"You want to be sure of the genius before you go advertising it——"

"Oh, as to that, I've noticed a growing conviction about your pallid brow.—To be sitting meekly with one candle and not go raging round after a lamp!"

"I can see perfectly well——"

"Oh no, you can't. Genius is always half blind, or else it's a fraud. Fred, did you ask for a lamp?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jill, don't bother. What does the wretched thing matter?"

"Not much really to rational people. But it would simply kill Grandmother Devereux if she knew they treated you like this. It's a sort of a blot on all of us—when it comes to the servants being impudent. And now," she continued blandly, "when you see that hiding your light under a bushel just turns it into a stumbling-block for fools, perhaps you'll blow it up, and let its blaze lead them into the right path. And be a cheerful pauper, as I always strive to be."

"Jill, you know——"

"Oh, I know more than I want to. Basking in the searching rays of pride and rectitude *is* rather trying. Perhaps now that Jerry's home, oozing a success that doesn't entail harrying another farmer, and we can shout a little and stretch ourselves, she may forget to be so lofty-minded and snap at you comfortably when the bills come in."

"Jill, how do you know——"

"Do you take me for a born idiot? And, Fred, I'm really awfully proud of you."

"Because Jerry is a little?"

"No—yes—no. I've been a brute rather because *I am* proud. You must know, surely, that you're the most aggravating person that ever walked the earth."

Fred was fairly withering up. He had suffered a good deal in his time from the silence of woman; but if this was her speech, why, then heaven help man, that was all!

Jill stooped down and coolly blew out the candle.

"Come," said she, seizing his shoulder—"come, and we'll all be happy paupers together. Fred, I believe in Jerry himself far more than I do in the money. I can't believe thoroughly in anything till I've seen it," said Jill, as they went into the hall.

"Oh, Jill, that's so like you."

"Would you like me better if it wasn't?"

"No; then it wouldn't be you."

"Fred, you're getting quite clever! And aren't we

babbling a great deal this evening? Jerry's coming has disturbed the repose of centuries. He's been round ever since he came opening shut doors."

The changing lights upon Jill's face, the new eagerness in her voice, her somewhat jumpy kindness to himself, were all combined, giving Fred a racking headache.

His excellent clothes hung gracelessly upon his gaunt figure. He had the tired, dull, blinking eyes of a boy who reads too much in a dim light, and yet Jerry's first thought when he looked up to see him slouching to a seat was what an utterly incomprehensible fool the cleverest woman can be in her unassisted judgment upon a genuine man.

"She has too often to pick up her experience among the imitation ones," mused Jerry sadly.

Fred, although he failed altogether to appeal to good women, often impressed indifferent men.

Jerry, moreover, knew too much of instability and its marketable worthlessness not to put sound values upon any stable commodity. He had lived a good deal in stifling airs, moreover, and his nose was keen for freshness. He had flourished likewise in an atmosphere of brag, and found even unnecessary modesty rather quaint and attractive. Fortunately for himself, whilst yet in his early youth Jerry could afford to take kindly views in a general sort of way. He had a pretty taste in virtue and moreover was absolutely devoid of morbidity. He had a proprietary and territorial right in Fred, moreover, and hoped presently to force him into common sense. Just for the moment, however, he had no mind for removing mountains. He wanted to be happy with Jill.

Amongst the many anomalies in Jerry's character the most surprising was the fidelity with which he clung to his old foolish boy's love. It was by no neans his only one. He had suffered them in dozens. Even under the African moon he rarely thought of Jill but as the centre in a chaplet of stars. But at his first startled sight of her upon his return all the dross was stripped clean off, and Jill shone alone. His

thoughts came flocking in about her, and her delectable mutability kept them fixed. For no matter what her mood, Jill's resistance to the unknown part in him, of which she had no experience, but a vast intuition, aroused all Jerry's fighting spirit and gave zest to his passion.

Instead of weakening Jerry's natural turn for affairs, this serious pursuit of a girl literally without a dress to her back, if anything, strengthened it. Every experience went to teach Jerry, and the assaying of metals with a multiplicity of tests had become a matter of habit with him. When he found, then, how strong a hold Jill was getting upon him, before he went a step further he was resolved to put the thing to a crucial and ultimate test. He had no desire to precipitate either Jill or himself into premature misery or the Divorce Court.

Besides Jill, he had seen women bound hand and foot in little stuffy pens, likewise in the far places of the earth, let loose; but so far he had not seen the woman of London. To know her he had been led to suppose was to know everything. And in his varied life Jerry had learnt that in these latter days it is best to walk by sight. So one day he wrote to his father to expect him, and the next he was off.

Jill bade him good-bye with clear eyes full of laughter; but in an odd helpless way she knew that she was being weighed in the balance.

That evening she insisted upon Fred's going for a walk in the dark with her. Fred had a dreadfully trying time of it, but bore himself heroically. And as he did not return to Oxford for several weeks, he had the advantage of enjoying several other evening walks. By the time he reached the University their effect upon him had become quite appreciable. All his friends were surprised to see him looking so braced up and well. Fred had bent his long back—the bones a little weak yet, and late in setting—to the petty paltering blows of relentless charity. But it was only in the sheer nature of things that he should lift back, and head to face the great blast.

It was what Fred honestly took to be the death-blow to his

last hope which made him at last lift himself bodily and squarely out into his clothes until they actually seemed to fit him, and further fortified by the taste of Jill's commendation to go straight at life.

Jerry, meantime, was in no sort of way disappointed in London viewed as a seat of learning, and he had the best advantages. To give Lawrence Devereux his due, he had never known any human creature whom it were not well to know. And he had conscientiously prepared the way for Jerry. Jerry himself did the rest. He was frank, fair, and free. He was fresh with the open air, and came thirsting for knowledge, so he sat gaily at the feet of woman and learnt of her.

He came back to the island late in July, for he had waited for the very last party. In his heart was a world of experience, but only one Jill. He would not stay with her yet, however. He was asked to three houses for the shooting, and knowledge breeds greed; he wanted to know more. Besides, the present, as it was, was too exquisite to tamper with. Jerry made it a rule never to tempt Providence, which was indeed one of the factors in his success. Jill, with the little veiling of reserve softening her angles, was a constant joy. Her shots at the truth came near enough to it to be exhilarating. After a long colonial experience the entire situation was restful in the extreme, while the position of Fred in the business did not give rise even to a moment's uneasiness.

Although Jerry was, as we have seen, far too coherent not to admit Fred's superiority to himself, a beautiful faith in the blunting effect of civilisation upon the elemental instinct of woman in her judgment of man made him generous. Far be it from him to slight Fred or belaud himself. But he knew well where they both stood. He could sum up Fred's position with much benevolence and some common sense.

"This hopeless attachment will concentrate his attention and save him from a succession of more hopeful ones—be a conservation of valuable energy. In fact, it's not every fellow who has the luck to get such a start.

Jerry saw no reason, therefore, to hurry himself upon Fred's account, and he had a sincere affection for him.

Although expediency might have stretched the wings of Jerry's good-nature and tempered its arrogance, the active principle was still alive within him, and Jerry would have been very much ashamed of himself if it had not been.

In the little interval of pure delight which on his way to partridge-shooting he halted upon the island to enjoy, Jerry remembered that he owed a duty to Fred. So one day he enticed him down to the shore. It was always going down to the shore indeed at Knockeen, unless one went up the hill where the graves stood, the only hill in the island that rose higher than that upon which the house was built. From sea and land those graves stood out white against the sky, a sure and trusty beacon always that never failed. The soft silver sea-mist, in which the island so often lay swathed, rarely crept higher than half way up the hill. The graves still lifted themselves above it, therefore, calm and inexorable. The fleecy clouds rarely dropped so low. There was no escaping those vigilant sentinels. They dominated the island.

When they reached the shore, the young men turned by sheer force of habit to look up at the graves.

Mrs. Devereux was climbing the hill, carrying what in the distance looked like an armful of white cloud.

"She's been gathering white flowers," said Fred; "it's some anniversary."

"Good Lord, does she do that still?"

"We don't change much on the island."

Jerry turned impatiently towards the sea. The air was full of storm; the waters leaden and still. The heather, that when the sun shone was a purple glory over all that great jutting spur of coast-land, looked dull and cold. Two seagulls were fighting furiously for a fish a hundred yards out to sea. The doves were complaining in the woods. And above them upon the hill a curlew began to scream like a delirious woman.

A sort of slow paralysis, the speciality of the island upon a grey day, was stealing up insidiously around Jerry, seizing

limbs and senses in a soft, relentless grasp. It was an unaccustomed clogging atmosphere, singularly repugnant to one of his temperament. He pulled himself together in a lively protest.

"Oh, for heaven's sake come out of this."

"Certainly," said Fred suavely. "Where shall we go?"

"Confound you! 'Pon my soul, I never before fairly grasped the full significance of a hereditary island. I was generally away, you know."

He looked up at the slate roofs of a house on a small hill, the one other large house upon the island. It stood above a wilderness of jagged rocks to the right.

"Does no one ever take the Fontaines' house, then?"

"No one, except in July and August. And we have a profound distrust of summer visitors. By the time we're satisfied as to their antecedents they're generally gone."

"But Jill——"

"Jill never gives away Grandmother Devereux, you know."

"The devastating rectitude of the place! Poor little Jill!"

"Always holding in her genius with both hands. It's hardly the place for that sort of thing," said Fred stolidly.

"Genius! That's a big word for Jill!"

Jerry's affection for Jill was boundless, but he made no pretence himself to genius, and got on excellently well without it. In a wife—— He shuddered. Mr. Devereux was in many ways still a creature of conventions.

"She has a genius for living. I think," said Fred, hesitating, "it's the best sort in the end, but it wants some outlet. I fancy Jill finds it pretty hard to hold herself in, especially in the winter."

"Oh, that sort of genius," said Jerry cheerfully. "It's a gift, and does almost amount to genius, perhaps. Still, girls find a lot of consolation in trying their wings, even in solitude. They're less vain at heart than we are, and can get on without the foot-lights, you know. They're used to living their lives a good deal in themselves. They've been at it so long, you see, it's got into their blood, and they're really not half so shallow

as we are; they have more to draw upon. Above all, they have the inestimable advantage of being able to brood over their affections without getting bored."

"Have they?" said Fred. "You've met a lot of them, so I dare say you know. But I'm inclined to think that Jill gets bored very frequently."

Jerry threw an intelligent glance at him, filled his pipe, and began to think of Jill. Her radiant image must surely dissipate the choking ineptitude crawling in about him. But Jill got blended in greyly with everything else, an indistinct elfish wraith.

Jerry's naturally sane mind sprang back to a reconsideration of his recent sweeping assertions.

"I believe you're right," he said, laughing frankly. "It must be hell here in winter, even for women. I know nothing about it at all, you know. Just coming back from school, it's home."

"You couldn't very well criticise a place where they count time by your comings and goings."

This was more than Fred had meant to say. "It's the slimy greyness," he thought; "it gets into you. You'll say anything."

Jerry was quite as uncomfortable. No man likes to be clapped down upon another's confidence through the influence of atmospheric pressure. So for a few minutes both the men threw stones at a dipper, then plunged casually into the politics of South Africa.

But if Jerry had something that must get said, he always said it, and this unpleasant incident reminded him of Fred in a practical light. If the sentiment peculiar to his family tinged his eyes and gave grace to his manners, it interfered but little with Jerry's intentions; and his intentions, now they were recalled to his memory, were to befriend Fred in an eminently unexceptionable, considerate sort of way.

When Jill's barbed arrows had stung into renewed activity his dormant common sense, Jerry, keenly aware that the contemplation of a picturesque but broken past interferes materially with the efficient handling of a present dulled with

fact had set up a golden calf in the shape of a future, and honestly worshipped it. Fred, besides being an object of genuine affection, came into this future. It might later on be distinctly unpleasant for all of them were Fred to be remembered as in any sort of way enveiled in pathos.

Jerry was still young enough to be extremely proud of his worldly-mindedness, but through all his reflections, as he calculated the distances of his stones, ran a haunting memory of Fred, dumb and stolid, smarting under the magnificent family charity, living his solitary contained life in the midst of the family's old home.

Brazen opportunist though he was, steeped to the lips in self-seeking, when at last Jerry attacked the horrid subject, he was no more nor less than a lovable boy, whilst in the last three months Fred had grown into a man. He was lanky still, and silent and shy, but the dignity of a wholesome growth makes it difficult to offer assistance to a friend.

Jerry's smooth burnt cheeks were now as red as a ploughboy's; his voice dwindled in a way it had not done since, as a middy, he had been called upon to offer compromising explanations to a superior officer.

"I say, Fred," said he, "as there's no longer any need for any of us to screw, don't you think you ought to launch out a bit? You're the only one belonging to us at Oxford now, and for the honour of the family you ought to do a bit of entertaining in a mild way. Besides, you've got to think of your own name; you never were half proud enough of being a Morton. I didn't even know your nearness to the title till the other day."

Fred laughed.

"It always seemed to be such a duffing thing on the island to be anything else than a Devereux. I knew you'd be wanting to give me a lift, Jerry. You're not changed a bit, really; and I've gone through it all, and have come to the conclusion that I'd rather you didn't. It was pretty bad at first, but I've got over all that. I'm all right. I go out as much as I want to, and could go out a lot more. Even for

this vacation I've had three invitations," said Fred, with honest pride.

"To go visiting without a brass farthing in your pocket," thought Jerry.

"They're glad enough to have you, of course," he said aloud.

"It's not the success these people like—it's me," said Fred hastily, flushing a little. "You get enough of the other thing. You grow tired of being an object of kindly interest, of being valued in proportion to the credit you do your college, and being prodded into by experts. It's like being a prize bull. You want something more commonplace. I never gave a 'wine' in my life, and I hardly ever go to one. But I have lots of friends."

"That's not everything. You ought to have a position."

"So I have," said Fred coolly. "I'm quite happy. It's awfully nice to be keeping yourself at last," he said simply. "You can't help it, but all the time you're robbing women you feel a skunk."

"I'd like awfully to have done something," said Jerry, almost shyly; "but I think you're right. You'll do better without me. Still, you might get one good rig-out, and pay me back."

"There's no need for that even. Coaching pays pretty well. These are the last clothes I'll have to bother Grandmother Devereux to get for me."

"That," said Jerry, "will be an awful shock to Grandmother Devereux."

"It will," said Fred gravely, "and to Jill too. I say, Jerry, men are easier on the whole than women, don't you think?"

But upon this matter Jerry threw no light.

"Fred, how did you get on at Eton?"

"I began badly," said Fred. "I'm slow, you know, and knew from the first that I couldn't both work and go in for games, so I started by working and doing nothing else. I had a beastly time of it, and, after all, it's only fair to fellows to prove your capacity; so I showed them I could play all right. After that I could do as I liked."

Jerry looked at him, but said nothing.

CHAPTER X

JERRY was back from his partridge-shooting jaded with knowledge, restoring himself in the pleasant freshness of Jill; but, knowing now most things, he was filled with a doubt at one and the same time diffident and exploratory. Despite all his insolent practicality, which stopped at nothing rational, he hesitated to disturb the repose of any creature so shrewd and yet so ignorant as Jill. The simplicity of a country maid would not have troubled him in the least; he felt quite equal to dealing with dozens of her kind, and could have taught each severally precisely what he wanted her to know.

Jill would learn what she wanted to know herself, and she was panting to sweep in the knowledge of the whole earth, and then to sift it to her liking. Already was she guessing, guessing, guessing with parted lips and a naturally clear intelligence, and her horizon was boundless. Jerry had few delusions; he very well knew that his horizon was neatly and discreetly hemmed in by himself. He had weighed, compared, and dissected; but Jill had stood all the tests, and he now frankly adored her. At the same time, he had never yet, except that old, sad, aching once which now lay far away, hidden amongst the dead gods, been left behind, and he never meant to be left behind again by any man. There was no reason that he should be. He could look far ahead of any man he ever knew; he had the strength and resource of any three. The mere thought of being left behind by a woman rankled like a wound in Jerry's soul; for he knew just enough of Jill's ideals to be fearful of what she might eventually evolve from them. They were of a progressive quality, and all made in a wayward way, for what struck Jerry's pleasure-loving nature as a somewhat bleak and stony righteousness.

The very first day he had ever come upon Jill she was on her knees in the wood propitiating gorgeous angels with vials of

wrath under their wings with small gifts of corn and candied sugar, six halfpennies, and a slate-full of sums, every one right—and Jill detesting arithmetic like poison! There was no trace of an erasure, moreover, anywhere, and the figures were copper-plate.

There was a rigidity about the form of worship that even then jarred upon Jerry. Without loss of time he put Jill on to Troy and the Greeks. But the greed for heathen blood palls in solitude, and, growing always fearsome towards night, Jill forsook it for the even less cheerful company of Christian martyrs—John Knox and a wilderness of Popish saints picked up at random from ancient books.

Chased from the contemplation of these worthies by their horrid intimacy with the devil and their dejecting family likeness to Grandmother Devereux, Jill, tired of darkness, sprang towards the sun, and seized upon the glamour of King Arthur and his glittering knights.

They went all through that part together, she and Jerry, one summer holiday, with Fred listening at the other side of the tree, and parted bitterly; for Jill, after trying with all her might to follow Jerry's natural aversion to prigs and leanings towards the brilliancy of original sin, was forced back, in spite of her reason, upon the high-principled dulness of Arthur.

Jerry was painfully aware, moreover, that she had fairly to flee from the Stuart period, because, do what she would, she was forced into thinking better of Cromwell than of any of the rest of the crowd. And this to one of her blood and his was no less than a stinging and rankling disgrace.

Then came the magnificent epoch of the Fontaine family. Since that radiant period Jill's ideals were only hinted at in her letters; but Jerry had his suspicions that the poker-like back of the Devereux women ran inexorably through them all. At the present time Jill had no ideals. She had put her foot down upon them—lock, stock, and barrel—and was full to the brim of the great Beyond and the part she herself was to play in it. But this was an interlude. She would be searching him

next for the attributes necessary to her peculiar turn of mind; and in this matter Jerry felt that he could never oblige Jill. Jill was exacting, and he had no mind to be himself dropped delicately amongst dead gods and general *débris*, with his wife climbing on and up in her alert, game, lithe way.

He wished, with a gentle solicitude, that Jill could know what, considering all things, a decent sort of chap he really was. It was not fair to Jill that she had no one to compare him with but Fred and her own ridiculous ideals.

That he could be moulded to Jill's exorbitant desires never, even at twenty-three, entered into Jerry's speculations; for, so far as he went, he was honest.

But he loved Jill; he longed for her; the mere thought of seeing her coming forth from her wretched, dull life to conquer the world beside him made him breathless. And nothing withheld him from saying so and seizing his joy but that inexplicable something behind her eyes which he felt would be coming to the surface in due time and confounding him, and the melancholy fact that, in spite of taste, race, and judgment, she must in her heart still perforce prefer Cromwell to Charles Stuart.

Jerry disliked indefiniteness as much as Jill herself. He detested any dim psychological barrier to his fulness of joy; any vague discomfort in a household, coupled with a woman and his own ineffectuality, made him shudder. Jerry was almost cat-like in his love for true domestic bliss. He had seen the effect of iron rectitude about the hearth-stone upon Fred. In one of the houses where he had been staying, the husband, a thorough good fellow without any nonsense about him, who took an interest in stocks and had a stout, well-wearing moral fibre very much like his own, had a wife with a high mind, and more than once, in a horrid prophetic way for which he despised himself, had Jerry felt like a worm in the presence of this admirable lady.

But a cablegram came one day which dissipated all the doubts of the young man and crystallised all his emotions. It was from the mine to say that another lode was struck; fresh

machinery and more capital were necessary; that he must set things in train in London, and return at once to Africa.

Jerry was going back to his beautiful god Success, but he was leaving Jill, and then all of a sudden he knew that failure with Jill would be better than success without her, for, every disqualification notwithstanding, Jill was his only love. When he set forth to take her down towards the setting sun to tell her so, he loved her with his whole heart and soul and brain, so far as they all went, and his heart swelled with pride that he did so love her. And, after all, Jill was a little unknown, unfinished creature without a cent and with rasping limitations, and Jerry could have had rank and fortune for the asking.

He never thought of this, however, and by the time he was half-way down the hill his pulses were racing wildly; he was a boy with his heart in his mouth.

Jill had her hat in her hand and her smooth, small head was lifted even higher than usual to hide her pain at Jerry's going and Jerry's silence—he had been writing letters all that endless morning—and her own shame at the untoward desolation of her mind. Jill hated dulness and loved joy; all that morning she had tried hard to get over her morbidity. She had searched diligently for eggs and tormented the piano conscientiously, fed the colts with sugar, and snipped dead leaves by the hundred, the only form of gardening permitted to her; she had envied Grandmother Devereux cleaning silver and Hannah groaning over the pastry-board. Driven to desperation, she had even tried Fred; but he seemed afraid of looking her square in the face and avoided any mention of Jerry.

And all the time Jerry was going—going—going; the racing hours were spreading and widening out again, huge, gaping, vacant. All the doors Jerry had thrown open were creaking back again into their rusty bolts. The graves and the glittering sea were closing in again on the island. Everything was creeping back insidiously to its stagnant repose—everything but herself, and she was burning with new life.

"Oh, Jill, it's awful to have to leave you," said Jerry at last.

They had got to the crest of the hill before he could say anything. The air was clear and bright with the first sparkle of frost. Her face was like a little cream cameo tilted up against the green sky.

The relief of words was unutterable. Jill sighed. But she had a turn for business all her own.

"Then why, when you had the chance, did you leave us so often?"

"Because—oh, well——"

"Oh, Jerry, you wanted to see if we'd pass muster. Are —are you satisfied?"

For an instant Jerry could have asked the hills to cover him, but he had just enough sense left to look at her, and Jill dropped her eyes and in her turn felt imbecile.

She had in her time often felt baffled, thwarted, and speechless under the fire of eyes, but this sudden failure of intellect was unprecedented. Her first impulse was to elude it.

"Oh, Jerry, let's race down to the sea."

"No," said Jerry resolutely, "we'll stay here. Oh, Jill, don't you see," here he began to stumble, "we know so—so little. I had to be sure. But now I've seen all that's to be seen and I know what women are."

The fact of Jerry's looking rather imbecile immensely strengthened Jill's faltering intelligence.

"Oh, do you?" she said sweetly.

But Jerry, brought to bay by true passion, was sincere now, and, simple and tender, in no mood to notice fruitless byplay.

"Jill, I had to find out, dear, for both of us."

"Find out for both of us? Find out what?"

She knew she was going to be overwhelmed by something. She was beginning to feel powerless. Her face was mutinous, but her voice broke.

"Find out if perhaps I might change—find out just how much I—I love you——"

"Jerry!"

"There's no one like you anywhere, Jill—no one. I do love you. Oh, Jill, I do. Oh, how can you look like that? To love in the way I love you is horribly serious. It's amazing and awful. It—it staggers a man."

"Dear me!" said Jill feebly.

"I feel this minute as if I'd never be able to think a little thought again or do—do a shady thing, you know. One grows —oh, you know, rather broad-minded in South Africa. Oh, Jill, loving you is altering things all round. And, dear, do you think you can love me?"

Jill was staring hard at a new Jerry, head and shoulders above the old one, and all her wits came racing back to her.

"I wonder which is the real Jerry," she thought, "which—oh, which?"

In her fear and distress of a sudden she grew womanly and diplomatic and forthwith began to temporise.

"Oh, Jerry, it's all very well for you, but I've had no chance of comparing and sorting and peacocking round, dividing the goats from the sheep. There's been no one to thresh out and go into here but the mainland young men, who gobble at you;—and Fred. You can't compare people with Fred, especially you."

"Jill, how can you——"

"I'm not sure," she pursued thoughtfully, "that Fred's quite steady enough on his legs to compare him with any one yet. He's unique, more or less."

"What can Fred matter? As to those mainland sticks—— Jill, can't you try to care for me, even just a little? What does any one else matter to either of us?"

Jill's eyes were back upon him, seeing all the things she had been wanting to see all these years, which were missing more than ever when he came home. Her eyes were soon brightening and softening and flashing with the prettiest veiled joy. But Jill was always obliged to defend herself against the unknown.

"Oh, Jerry, speak for yourself. You've taken good care to make opportunities and to use them. I am groping in the dark—you know I'm afraid of the dark, Jerry; I always was.

I like to see where I'm going. I like to be sure. I hate stumbling. I should hate to stumble on to you, of all people in the world. It would be an awful example to you, opposed to all my principles," she broke off, laughing elfishly.

"Jill! Jill! can you love me?"

"I—I've never loved any one. How on earth can I tell whether I can or not?"

He caught her hands roughly. They were so small and slender that his grasp softened upon them insensibly. There was no harshness in Jerry, even for himself, and he was throbbing with tenderness for the growing pathos in Jill's protesting inquiries, while the mute appeal for his decision thrilled him with a whimsical triumph.

There was not an atom of woman in Jerry. It was one of his limitations. His conscience was wholesale, fearless, and equal to any amount of responsibility for himself or any one else.

"Jill," he assured her eagerly, "I think you love me. I feel sure you do. You're quite different from when I came. There's been no one to alter you but me," said Jerry complacently.

"There has," she cried, "there's been the change in you—the change I can't understand."

"That's being a man, Jill dear," explained Jerry gravely. "And you're so young."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Then if I'm too young to understand a man, I must be too young to love one."

"Dearest, it's so different."

"That's extremely likely. But it's not an argument."

His hands were on her shoulder; she was shrinking away from his melting eyes. Jill felt the situation to be far too serious for foolishness; she was neither blushing nor coy.

In a dim way she knew what Jerry wanted her to give him. She was willing to give it to him, she must always have been wanting to give it to him, and yet in an odd way she knew that she was fighting for herself. She was a valiant little person, full of fighting spirit.

"Jerry," she protested, "it's not fair. What chance have I? All you've learnt you've learnt from girls."

"All that girls have taught me is to be surprised at nothing. You've taught me to love you, Jill. I know you love me," and with that Jerry caught her up in his strong arms and kissed her. She gasped softly, and sighed, but she struggled no longer. When he let her go at last she sighed again, shook herself, dropping her hands at her sides like a schoolgirl, and in a mute sort of way sat down tiredly on the grass.

"Now you've done it," said she. "I'll have to love you now, I suppose."

Jerry soothed her. Her bewitching weakness called up all his strength. He was quiet, kind, and gentle. His soul thrilled with a sense of its own potentialities; he was quite startled to find so much unexpected greatness aquick within him, for Jerry in the matter of mental analysis was generally rational enough.

When Jill felt a little better she looked up at him.

"Oh, Jerry, I do love you, I believe. You've settled the question, but for goodness' sake keep me proud of you or I'll be wishing we were both dead, and even island life has never driven me to that. Jerry," she went on in no sort of way relaxing in her honest stare, "you look just exactly right now, so I don't mind telling you that you've been worrying me frightfully. It was your eyes and your nose—the end of it—and a twist about your mouth; you looked—sometimes you looked as if you could be pretty shabby if the need arose; you looked too sharp—not altogether unlike Grandmother Devereux's defaulting attorney Murphy, only, of course, a gentleman."

"Jill, you ought not to judge of any one man in that wholesale way, dear, till you've seen a few."

"But isn't that just what I've been saying? If only I'd had the chance of meeting some, perhaps of loving an odd one or so—more or less! If it was only Fred! I dare say we'll all be immensely interested in Fred one day, but to practise on!"

"Jill, this is hardly fair either to Fred or to me."

"Why? It's the commonest of common sense. You know how I've been brought up. I know nothing thoroughly of anything; I have a smattering of languages, music, painting. You could confuse me in any subject. Above all, I know nothing of human beings, and here I am setting out gaily to love one. Oh, Jerry," she paused and softly laughed, "Jerry, you've betrayed me with a kiss. I think I'm glad on the whole, but it's not fair—'tisn't fair. Perhaps it comes of a Devereux going into business."

"Oh, Jill——"

"And, Jerry, with all your advantages, you mustn't be selfish and begrudging and shoot out your lip at the thought of my practising on Fred. It isn't essential to keep it in the family, of course. Directly any one else turns up I'll practise on him, but in the meantime, if I have a smattering of everything else, I mean to know people down to the ground. It will really only be fair to you, else I'll be judging you by Grandmother Devereux."

"Jill, you're too bad. Won't you take my word for anything?"

"I'll take it for everything so long as your face agrees with it. Oh, Jerry, just be always what you are this minute. I'm glad you love me," she cried suddenly, "and I never knew before what real joy was. Jerry, come round to all the dull old places and shed some of it about for me to pick up when you're gone."

Her eyes filled with great swift tears and she held his arm like a vice.

"Jerry! Jerry! Couldn't we be married right off in a hurry? I've read of things—it's possible. I'm afraid to let you go without me. I'm afraid. It may never be the same again perhaps. Jerry, if you were to alter back again? There's a touch of chameleon in you, Jerry."

"But, Jill, have you no trust in me, no confidence? I must start in three hours. I must be at Southampton on Saturday, and cramp a month's work into three days. There are other

people involved besides myself. Delay might mean ruin; this business is urgent."

"I dare say it is. I shouldn't delay it. The best thing that could happen to the business would be to have me in it, now, without a minute's delay."

She took her hands out of Jerry's, and with her arms behind her stood up against the mossy wall that fenced in the yearlings paddock. Her eyes looked out across the sea, her lips trembled.

"We could do everything if we were together, Jerry. But we ought to begin now."

"Oh, Jill, I wish to God we could; but we can't. People can't do such things in real life."

"This isn't real life. It's our own island, and there's no one to dare to be surprised at anything we do on it. You're afraid you couldn't keep your head clear with me tacked on to you, Jerry. Little you know! I'd keep it clear for you, I can tell you. The ordinary girl seems to have obscured your mental vision."

"Oh, Jill, how unfair you can be!"

"I ought to be with you. I could remind you—oh, of a lot. I'd do it very nicely, you wouldn't mind in the least. It's a risk your going alone. I—I feel it in my bones. I've known things before. There's second-sight amongst the Devereuxs. But since you won't have me, let's come and tell Grandmother."

CHAPTER XI

Mrs. Devereux was on her knees in what had once been the housekeeper's room, packing Jerry's portmanteau. She rose with deliberate politeness to give ear to the young people, took a seat, and in a horrid silence received their news.

Still mute as the dead, for several intolerable moments she made a sustained effort to see Jill plainly. It was becoming difficult now to peer close without betraying the strides with

which her blindness was overtaking her, and her whilom purposeful glance had developed into a devastating glare. Jill pinched Jerry to keep herself from quailing visibly. Mrs. Devereux could see nothing but a slim, unbending figure and a firm, small face without the shadow of a blush on it. She felt in no sort of way reassured by the vision. But Jerry being presumably the exciting cause in this folly, and the stronger—from the conventional point of view, she was careful mentally to add—she turned her attention upon him.

"Is this the bumptiousness of success, Jerry?" she inquired, in her fine, serene voice. "It looks very like it. I can imagine no other motive that could induce you to come here disturbing the household."

"But I—I love her," said Jerry lamely. "I want her to be my wife."

"So I gather. But at your age and hers—a wife!"

"Grandfather Nat was exactly twenty-three when he married you, and you——"

"Quite so. But that has nothing to do with the present outbreak of insanity. The cases are widely dissimilar. My husband was a man in whom there was no guile, and his affections were stable. As for me, if I was eighteen, I knew what I was doing. There were then still men on the mainland who had the leisure and means to be gentlemen. They were not entirely occupied in being starved out, as they unhappily now are; and every one of them," she pursued, with a sublime calm, "had in his day danced to my piping. It was altogether different. The men who taught me what men were like had lived in great cities. They had served their country in stirring times. They had learnt to behave themselves at Courts at a time when the bearing and conduct of a gentleman were still matters of some importance. They were instinct with wit and quick with life. If for lack of time," she explained haughtily, "I could not go to the great world, it could then find leisure to come to me. I chose my husband, with eyes open, out of a superb selection. In all her life Jill has never beheld a man who is not torpid with poverty, God help him!"

"But, Grandmother Devereux——"

"You have to acquire some dependable knowledge of the ingredients that go to compose marriage," pursued the lady, undisturbed, "before you can hope to succeed in it."

"But we do——"

"Do you think any one in his senses would take a groom on trust, or a scullerymaid? Yet here you are, Jill, ready to take a husband without a solitary credential."

"As if——"

"As lightly as though he were a chocolate cream. Stick to chocolate creams, Jill. They better befit your age and understanding. With them you can at least choose the right brand; you needn't go poisoning yourself in the dark. A husband, above all people in the world, to be taken on trust! Speculating in husbands at your age, forsooth!—perhaps to lose your all, whatever that may consist in," she murmured; "but, little or much, it's all a woman has, and she's bound to make the best of it. What do you know of each other, I'd like to ask?"

Her dim old hawk's eyes paused upon Jill, but she replied to herself.

"You know precisely what Jerry chooses to tell you, Jill, and Jerry's in just the condition to sell his birthright for an eyebrow."

"We've known each other all our lives," cried the badgered pair, with one voice. "There's not a thing——"

"No! Jerry, I admit, does tell anecdotes admirably. He reminds me of his great-grandfather, who lived in the days when conversation was still amongst the fine arts. Jerry is a born *raconteur*, and if a girl of eighteen can't surprise far wiser than poor Jerry into any folly, she must be wanting, that's all I can say, or have a crooked eye. Besides, the mawkishnesss inseparable from an unexpected parting would demoralise an archangel. You're the victims, both of you, of an emotional moment. I'm thankful to say, Jerry, that you're on the eve of a healthful sea voyage."

"I wish you'd understand, Grandmother Devereux," said

Jerry, with surprising coolness, "that we love each other, and that we're both of us in our right minds."

With her best air of detachment Grandmother Devereux pushed on.

"To come prancing back from that outrageous colony putting notions into the girl's head! I'm thoroughly ashamed of you, Jerry, and I wish to the Lord I could send Jill to a good boarding-school."

"I've read somewhere," interposed Jill, while Jerry was getting his breath; "that marriage is as good for the disposition as any school."

"Indeed! But, as I said before, you have to serve an apprenticeship to marriage as to all other honest trades," remarked her ancestor, unappeased. "It's not fair even to you, Jerry. Jill is no biddable angel, I can tell you. A girl like Jill ought to have the chance of whetting her sword on others than her husband. A girl has to get rid of a certain number of sensations before she'll settle down into a decent wife, and Jill more than any I have yet met. There's plenty of legitimate prey for purposes of experiment. Jill has, as it were, a proprietary right in these social necessities, and if she'll wait a little I'll see that she gets it."

"This isn't fair——"

Mrs. Devereux flung a surprised glance upon him.

"In what way is it not fair? If a man go out in sheer wanton idleness to seek adventure and tilt windmills, to tempt Providence in fact—a most insolent pursuit, to my mind—anything he may get he fully deserves. But it's peace for which a husband craves, neither windmills nor adventures. Unless he's a born fool he's already had his turn at these," remarked this uncompromising lady. "A girl is also human, in her own way, and I certainly don't care to think of Jill's making up for lost time at your expense, Jerry—a condition I'd have you to know which lies at the bottom of most of the disgrace of modern matrimony. You haven't the stamina for it, Jerry. There's a weak spot in you that calls for a wife with an established mind."

"Jill is the one wife in the whole world for me," said Jerry.

"If only you knew anything whatsoever about Jill," said Mrs. Devereux hopelessly, "or her vagaries! I doubt if any one living man could provide Jill with sufficient outlet for her energies, and not weaken in his attachment, if not in his intellect. I'm quite sure, Jerry, you're not the man to do it; you're not sufficiently long-suffering or stable, nor have you either the depth or the wit for the task."

"We can get rid of all the unnecessary sensations together on our enemies," put in Jerry.

"Do try to be at least commonly sane. If the Lord had seen fit to put you into the world for the purpose of giving galvanic shocks, He'd have made a pair of electric eels of you."

"I can't imagine anything more delightful than trying the effects of sensations on people," cried Jill; "they needn't necessarily be enemies, Jerry. Why shouldn't we do it together? Why shouldn't we see the nicest parts of each other, and enjoy ourselves together before we begin to talk of bad times, and economising, and feel draughts."

"If I could see in this bedlamite business one high aim, one gleam of reason!"

"But oh——" began Jill.

"Some wise man has said," the eyes of Grandmother Devereux were fixed dreamily upon Jerry, "that there is 'nothing so intolerable as a fortunate fool.' I fully agree with him."

"You were once happy too," cried Jill, and suddenly there was a light and glory upon her face. "Let us just be happy now—and presently—oh, there is so much time presently! But think of being absolutely, absolutely happy after eighteen dull years!"

Mrs. Devereux swallowed an odd little sound and went on in her gently controlled voice.

"I'd give my heart to see you both happy," she said slowly, "but happiness is a big word, and there's a thriving paradise of fools."

"We can learn wisdom together," said Jerry; "and even without it Jill is perfect."

The young man put his arms brazenly around her, and Jill leaned towards him with a proud face.

Mrs. Devereux's sight was now quite steady, and she knew true love when she saw it. Her heart fell, and words failed her.

"I'm not perfect," explained Jill, in the grateful pause, "and if I were, Jerry, you know you'd hate me. But, Grandmother Devereux, as applied to Jerry I'm just right—I am truly; I know I am, I know it—to the very tips of my fingers. I wish to goodness I could marry him straight off this minute," she added wistfully. "If I could—if we could set out together now—you'd be most awfully proud of us one day, Grandmother Devereux."

"At the present moment, Jill, I am literally blushing because of your bold-faced impudence. Don't you think that you had better sit down."

Jill's eyes flashed mutiny, but her lips trembled and she nestled a little closer in Jerry's undaunted clasp.

"No," she said, "Jerry's going to-day. We can't sit down like Dutch dolls and look just as if nothing was happening. Think of the life here! Why, I've never even suspected what this would be like."

"One can't reason with fools. You'd better go, both of you."

Without a second bidding they both went, but Grandmother Devereux sat on stonily and big scalding tears kept falling helplessly down upon her clasped hands. For she knew Jerry and she knew Jill, and her heart failed her for fear.

But Jill was in the dull schoolroom crying a little in Jerry's arms, and Jerry was comforting her.

"Oh, Jill, you darling! You sweet! You ripping brick! But you see now what I meant. We couldn't be married at a moment's notice. She'd never see it. It would be utterly impossible."

"Nothing reasonable that you simply feel you must have

is ever utterly impossible if the getting of it depends entirely on yourself," said Jill, drying her tears with a firm hand.

"But when it isn't reasonable?"

"I'm only speaking of reasonable things. Do you think I'm a baby to cry for the moon?"

She paused, the singular protest again upon all her face, then it slipped away softly and, for her, Jill looked patient. Moved to his depths by so unaccountable a spectacle, Jerry's ardent face was in a trice close up to hers, but she eluded him serenely.

"Jerry, go round and have it out with Fred, while I make the tea," she commanded. "And oh, do your hair, it's awful, and, Jerry, your collar's all crumpled. One had to show Grandmother Devereux—one always has to tell her all the truth somehow; it's no more than fair; besides, when she began to call us names, we simply had to bring her to her senses——"

"And just then," broke in Jerry eagerly, "it was like beginning a new life, launching a ship, you know, and we wanted her to wish us luck——"

"She didn't wish us luck, as it happened; she called us fools, but I dare say she meant well. Grandmother Devereux is one thing, other people are another thing altogether, so for goodness' sake make yourself respectable. Fred's rather peculiar, you know, and this—this is a sort of new departure in the island and—oh, Jerry, go and do your hair. I hear some one—it's Honora! If she begins to cry over you—she's equal to anything to-day!—I dare say I shall cry too, and I don't want to begin *that* until I've got a little used to—*this*."

Jerry was smarting under a little private wound of his own—Grandmother Devereux's lordly ignoring of his right to a man's place in nature in the matter of selecting a wife. This he would have liked to discuss with Jill, but Honora's asthmatic breathing in the door-way sent him flying, literally into the arms of Mrs. Devereux—she was groping her stately way through the hall—and they cannoned awkwardly.

"My dear Jerry!" said the lady. "They certainly say that love is blind, but I had hardly expected this. Since you are here, however, perhaps you will kindly come with me into the library. I want to speak to you."

Jerry would have liked a little preparation to clear his brain, but he went obediently, and with something not unlike awe it struck him that his grandmother had been crying. Tears since time immemorial had been an indictable offence in that household. Jerry in his amazement forgot the tactics of war and permitted the lady to strike the first blow.

"Now, Jerry, you're a sound business man, so I gather, and without Jill here to make you imbecile you may possibly be induced to listen to reason. I doubt if you know in the least what you're doing——"

"I know absolutely what I'm doing."

Mrs. Devereux lifted her hand as though it had been a sceptre.

"We'll consider all that as said. I have borne thirteen children, seven of whom lived to be of a marriageable age. Do you imagine, therefore, that there is a word you can say that I don't know by heart? My poor dear boy, I know every turn and twist of you, and from my soul I pity you. You've embarked upon a reckless enterprise, and, worse still, you've got another fool to join you in it——"

"Oh, really——"

"My dear Jerry, you go in an hour, and a woman's life may last for eighty years. I have to think of Jill's eighty years, and not of your moment. Half the girls who smirk themselves into married misery wouldn't, from all I hear, be worth this trouble, but Jill is." She paused, narrowing her eyes to see Jerry. "Jill is a hard nut to crack, but her heart is sound—I know nothing about this personally, but I believe that whoever gets it will eventually find it sweet——"

"I——"

"Dear me, Jerry, we have only a few minutes. Do hold your tongue! As if I don't know all that! And poor little thing, she loves you in her own way. God help me! didn't

I see it? In her little sharp bitter-sweet way she loves you. But take my word for it, Jerry Devereux, Jill will have a better way of loving than that, and my fear—my fear, boy, is that the way won't perhaps be for you, and if it is, Jerry, you may not understand it. I have my doubts of you. You have more cock-sureness than wit, with all your thirty thousand pounds. However, with this exception you've behaved very well since you've been at home, and it's been good to see you, dear."

She spoke with a sudden melting of voice and face that touched the kindly heart of Jerry to its depths. He was the only one of her descendants who had ever taken a personal liberty with Grandmother Devereux, and now he plumped down his hand upon her shoulder in a courageous way that struck her grim sense of humour.

"It's like taking a fence you're not quite sure of, isn't it, Jerry? And yet," she added, looking up at him, "there was a time when I liked caresses, but it's easy to get out of the way of expecting them, and it's a habit that if you once lose you can't resume with any degree of comfort. Jerry, how like your grandfather you are! But it's where you fall short of him that makes me tremble. He may have had his faults"—Mrs. Devereux was an honest woman, and paused at the thought of Nat's condition after certain hunting dinners —"but one could have trusted the happiness of any woman God ever made to your grandfather's keeping. However, we have no time to lose," she said, with an abrupt gesture of her strong hands as though she were beating back the past. "The longer I look at you the more impervious do you seem to me to reason. I shall, therefore, not waste any more of it on you. But I want you distinctly to know that this sentimental outbreak is not to be looked upon as an engagement. You are both free. And I've been considering—I can manage it quite well next year—I'll take Jill to London. Under the regrettable circumstances it's indeed the only thing left to be done. Jill must learn to be afraid with wisdom before she can choose with wisdom, and it's those capable of inspiring fear who alone can

teach Jill. She's as obstinate as—the rest of you : words won't touch her; but she has the eyes of a hawk and the back of a Devereux. Besides, since she's kith and kin to me I don't care that she should drop to the first man she meets, like a ripe plum."

"Grandmother——"

"My good Jerry, I know all you've got to say far better than you can say it. You're modern, you'd be sure to stumble and use slang terms, and your breath smells of tobacco. I've heard both raptures and arguments in correct English, with a clean wholesome smell of the stables, in days when men were considerate, even when they happened to be in love. However feeble and vapid their condition, they then invariably ate tea to take off the smell of tobacco before they entered the presence of a lady."

"I won't bother you with slangy raptures, and it's only on principle you disapprove of tobacco," said Jerry, but he spoke softly and stroked her shoulder, which, for all her efforts, was quivering piteously. "But whether it's an engagement or not, Jill belongs to me as much as she does to you; and I know what the tenants are, so I've put a little money in the bank here, and I want you to use it. It will cost a lot to take her to London," he said hurriedly, "and I know she wants to take lessons in things, and they all like clothes directly they see a shop. I'd like Jill to look all right, and—oh, you know—to feel it. She'll be sorry while I'm away," he added simply; "I'd like to give her something to amuse herself with. I'd like——"

"I dare say you would! Supposing—I don't say it's likely—but supposing she were to choose to marry some one else in your absence, how do you think she'd feel if she found out by any chance that you'd been paying for her petticoats? How do you think that I should be likely to feel? You're as generous as your grandfather, Jerry, but I'm thankful to say he had a deal more common sense. Be good enough to put that money back into your own bank before you go. But stay. I don't want the bank manager, a prying old viper

who discusses one's affairs with his wife—that's what the county's come to!—to be drawing and disseminating his own conclusions. Leave it there as a deposit account. Jill will be all right; that I promise you. Do you think it at all likely that I should cart round a beggar-maid amongst your father's fine friends and my own old ones, who are, at least, respectable? I wish Jill," she concluded grandly, "to see all sides of life."

"This will hamper you terribly," protested Jerry earnestly.

"I have grown used to being hampered. If a thing is right and necessary, it's got to be done. So far we have not wanted for right and necessary things. Now, Jerry, go to Jill. And in hastening to be rich don't forget to be a gentleman. You're too amiable, Jerry Devereux, and I doubt if you're quite big enough to be ever any other than a dirty-handed millionaire. To emerge unsoiled from the slough of commerce requires more of a mental and moral equipment than any of which you can boast. Jill's affection may continue undaunted. As I said before, she's as stubborn as a mule, but don't flatter yourself that one speck that you may acquire in your progress will escape her. Jill has a right mind in spite of herself, and she'll use it. How, God only knows. All I know is that I don't want her to have cause to be using it on you. So take care, boy, take care, and go! go! But come back to me again at the last."

She paused upon the words, but her voice never failed her, and her eyes were steady, tearless, and bright.

"He could have served his Queen like a gallant gentleman," she thought, holding her hands tight in her lap and sighing heavily. "Wholesome restriction, a romantic point of view, and sea air were precisely what Jerry called for. He was never made to resist the blandishments of that unutterable whore Commerce. He'll be bringing a new sin into this unfortunate family, as if it hadn't already enough of its own. And," she added, with prophetic eyes, "I feel certain—it's borne in upon me—that in some way or another he'll be imperilling Jill's immortal soul. However, if she's fool enough to risk her soul

for any man born of woman, if we starve for it I'll see that she does it with open eyes. My own eyes must, however, be put off again." She threw up her head. "I'll see enough, at any rate, to take care she behaves herself, and at least my hearing's unimpaired. But how I'm to manage the presentation toggery is more than I can enter upon just now. There's a trunk full of lace," she mused, "and I have my old velvet. There's one star left for me. Jill's skin is good; she'll pass without trinkets."

The voices of the two crossing the lawn drew her to the window.

"As I'm a living sinner," she muttered, "the girl's jeering, and the boat starting in twenty minutes! It's a gift of the moderns—in happy circumstances—in unhappy it might breed vixens. Jill would be a poisonous vixen, poor child!"

For three days after Jerry left Jill said little, and behaved like an angel.

Mrs. Devereux was really anxious, and made the girl drink rabbit broth at stated intervals. The chickens had been all used up for Jerry.

This form of subdued sympathy roused Jill to action. With a view to escape the recurring doses she took immense walks with Fred, and, with a simplicity oddly at variance with her precocious shrewdness, betrayed herself at every turn; and in each of Jill's outspoken confessions was there the light clashing of steel.

Fred fairly quailed before the strength of her affection for Jerry and the fierce hardness in it, until sometimes when the dusk fell, and then he marvelled more than ever at the extraordinarily soft depths, of which, through the swift fires of mockery, he caught sudden illuminating glances.

"She could love so beautifully," Fred would think in his slow way.

It was at such moments that, for the first time in his life, Fred fell into the habit of criticising Jerry.

It was a wearing period. Fred felt it a positive relief to get back to Oxford and the daily company of man. And, in order

to blot out unprofitable subjects, through all the ensuing term he worked with a prodigious ardour, and advanced in bounds. The general effect of Jill was certainly of a stimulating nature.

All that autumn Mrs. Devereux made insistent raids upon the groaning tenants, and had queer conical sheds erected in the great haggart at the back of the kitchen garden; and when the winter fell the whole place was sweet with the smell of wood fires.

Early and late did she toil with her own hands in the bitter cold of the great bare disused still-room, while tenants from far-lying corners of the estate were frequently to be discerned struggling up with odd consignments of squeaking hogs. The amount of letters sent out was astonishing, and the carrier's cart made many and mysterious calls at the back door.

Jill's healthy young mind, craving for anything to fill the void left by Jerry, perceived a beckoning interest even in the surreptitious trade in home-cured bacon she felt sure was now being prosecuted upon the ancestral premises. Twittering with stored energy, and happily free of any trace of false pride, Jill panted to be in the business. But even her dauntless spirit hesitated before it ventured to lift itself in direct opposition to Grandmother Devereux's most immovable prejudice—an unbroken silence in regard to her management of the family fortunes. Part of this exasperating dumbness Jill naturally put down to the miserliness present—considering her antecedents, almost miraculously—in her forebear. But the rest was, of course, bred of the soil and its stultifying racial pride, and since in its varying forms it had robbed her youth of all its distractions, Jill's detestation of this haughty reticence increased daily in size and volume.

One day soon after Fred had gone, and no letter had come that week from Jerry, the island began to close in chokingly upon Jill, the graves glittered fiendishly, the curlews fairly outdid themselves in their shrill womanish dirges, and her fingers, sick to death of ineffectual drumming, fell to itch for more definite action. Her firm belief in the miser theory notwithstanding, Jill had a secret conviction that all this toil and moil

was to provide funds wherewith to launch her into society. She felt very much as Fred used to feel when he, too, was in the enjoyment of stately bounty. Like Fred, she was aching to bear her part in the labours, to show her recognition of the grim self-sacrifice they entailed. Like Fred also, she was mutinous with mortified gratitude.

Bacon-curing was hardly the sort of rush that Jill would have chosen. She had never, indeed, yet found one to her liking save that swift, sweet delirium of joy before Jerry went away. But it was the only active life within her grasp, and she objected to be deposited outside it in a lean bed of lavender. So she caught her breath one day, and down she went boldly into the flagged still-room.

Mrs. Devereux, with the unskilled aid of a lately tamed gorsoon with a mind agape for mischief, was patiently rubbing pork. She paused at the sight of Jill with lifted, alert head, but hands uninterruptedly busy with salt and sugar. Perceiving purpose in Jill's demeanour, however, she remarked upon the pleasantness of the weather, and told Flannagen to go and put wood on the outside fire and attend to the horse. Then she cleared her hands of brine, and reared herself up.

"This won't interest you, Jill, and surely you have not finished practising?"

"I've practised the regulation time—two hours," said Jill, lifting a tub off a stool and calmly sitting down on it. "I've been practising every day for two hours ever since I can remember, and I shall never be a real musician—never anything but a second-rate performer even. It seems such a waste of energy."

Mrs. Devereux sighed and resumed her rubbing. Contention with Jill appeared to her a peculiarly profitless pursuit. Since the girl did not happen to be a fool, however, it was no more than due to her to listen with as little direct comment as possible to what she had to say. After all, listening to those for whom she was responsible, was a non-committal attitude and a discipline to be endured with fortitude and good breeding.

"There are the Swedish exercises to be attended to."

Jill jumped up and with astonishing grace twisted herself into a variety of miraculous knots.

"There! What do I want with Swedish exercises?"

"Your mind, possibly, may not be so nimble as your body," suggested the elder lady.

"There's nothing more to be got out of Miss Le Cam; she's dried up apparently; and I've read every book that isn't absolutely impossible from its dulness."

Mrs. Devereux turned a large slab of bacon stolidly. She knew that Jill had not an idle bone in her body. The needs of Lawrence had taken every book save those connected with agriculture, and a few, unfitted for youth, which lay snugly in her strong box. The child spoke the staring, naked truth. Mentally she was half-starved; so far as Mrs. Devereux could see she had as yet no spirituality either to starve or to nourish —her amusements were nil. And she herself only too well knew the restlessness resulting upon a lover absent. She was unutterably sorry for Jill. But she distrusted sentiment with all the virulence of a despised modern, and she had but little of the modern *bonhomie*.

"You have now, at least, a definite object in life. You have something for which to prepare yourself."

"That's why I want to stretch. I want to feel my feet in something. I want to satisfy myself. If I were to strum all day I couldn't satisfy myself in music. Having had no education in all the other things I just wobble on the top. It doesn't matter," she added, in answer to an odd dumb look upon her grandmother's face. "I know just enough to make it do. Besides, people won't think of what I know," she said sublimely, "they'll be thinking of me."

Unheeding the quiet significance in the glance of Mrs. Devereux, Jill hurried on:

"Now I believe I should shine in the bacon business." She swept her hands grandly towards two great gaping hogs suspended from a beam. "I could do all that. I could write the letters and see the carrier and you could rest. Grand-

mother Devereux," said Jill unflinchingly, "I believe your eyes hurt you."

For a minute Mrs. Devereux stooped over her tub, then she lifted herself slowly.

"This is a specimen, then, of the bald vulgarity of the present generation," she remarked, in her bland, conversational way. "You might have spared it me until after you had picked it up at first hand in modern London, not from stray works of fiction probably imagined and written by members of the lower middle classes to support life. Have I ever made any mention of fatigue to you, Jill, or of my eyes failing me?"

For one short minute Jill leaned towards her imploringly, then her little delicate face set.

"Of course you haven't," she said, "that's not our way."

"Nor is it our way to permit girls of your age to do the work and acquire the outlook of menials. Do you suppose I can give you into any man's hands with coarsened skin and broken nails, and a forehead wrinkled with petty cares?"

But Jill was desperate for a modified freedom and she had a pursuing imagination. This proud old woman doubled over a pork-tub made a poignant picture before her bright, protesting young eyes.

"Girls nowadays ——"

"Girls nowadays, I am credibly informed, teach tradesmen's daughters to construe Latin in high schools, and glory in their shame. That has nothing to do with us. The time may indeed come in this hysterical volcanic era when you must work to live, but it is not for me to precipitate the evil day."

"I don't want to work especially," cried Jill, "I want to be alive!"

"Amidst your multitude of wants, Jill, have you ever experienced any desire to be a lady?"

"A lady in a big bare drawing-room with no one to speak to, nothing to do, no one to see you but the walls?" she cried, her voice, in sheer desperation, as hard as a mandolin string. "And you out here—curing bacon!"

"This scene is, to say the least of it, indecorous, and must

now cease. Perhaps when you go out you will kindly shut the door, Jill."

Mrs. Devereux buried her arms to her shoulders in the brine and directed her attention wholly upon her pork. But the virtue had gone out of her touches, she was tired, for she had a poignant understanding of Jill and of all Jill's vagaries. It was for this precise reason that she kept the girl firmly down amongst her responsibilities and, so to speak, generalised upon her. In any case, to strip her poverty to the bone before the kith and kin dependent upon her, to admit to self-sacrifice in the presence of one for whom she made it, would have been the death of the woman. While Jill spoke indeed Mrs. Devereux had more than once wished to the Lord that life were simpler and the times not quite so bad. In that case she and Jill might have worked to some degree together. They would have made an unequally yoked pair certainly, she reflected grimly, but they were both very lonely. As it was, there was too much to hide, too much to keep silence upon, too much to make light of. She must stand alone. There were, besides, other reasons for this devastating independence. Mrs. Devereux had been brought up in the faith that women were weaker vessels to be eventually offered up in matrimony, kept free from freckles and told a portion of every truth. It was now some years since she had herself voluntarily resigned the greater portion of her privileges, and the distant enchantment of her vanished youth invested them with a wistful pathos, making her only the more resolved to preserve them intact to Jill. She had so little else wherewith to endow the child.

CHAPTER XII

In spite of love it was a baffling and forbidding winter for Jill. For her grandmother it was a harassing one. Even Christmas was unalleviated by the presence of Fred. Having at last, by his own exertions, a little pocket-money to scatter liberally, he no longer felt any meanness in accepting invitations. This was the ostensible excuse he offered to himself for his unprecedented absence from the island.

As a matter of fact he was afraid of a whole long month of dim, sad twilights in the uninterrupted companionship of Jill. Directly the dusk fell, in spite of herself, Jill must melt a little, so the harried man would think with a tender, amused smile, and then the soft sweet beauty of her undiscovered under-nature must inevitably creep forth to undo him. Against this he had no defence, and it made him feel more than half a traitor to Jerry. For he had a sound conviction that this part of Jill belonged wholly to himself; that Jerry had never had so much as a glimpse into it. It was an inestimable possession, but the necessity to put a sea between it and himself spoilt Fred's holidays and made of him a dull and unsatisfactory object for the distraction of girls.

When they were talking him over afterwards, indeed, this air of carrying somewhere about his person a veiled lamp, together with his fine commanding nose and his university reputation invested him, in the malleable minds of these inquiring young persons, with a certain air of distinction. Their brothers moreover all liked Fred, while the elder generation of both sexes thought highly of his future, and looked upon him as a sound companion for their sons. Thus was Fred at last receiving his just dues in the matter of significance.

There was no especial beauty about his swarthy tan face; nothing saved it but its honest kindness. But for Jill's sake,

consciously, and unconsciously, because of the simple pleasure he took in the growing friendliness of everybody—Fred was always ridiculously grateful for recognition—he now held himself with an old-fashioned and gallant dignity, and took a good deal of patience and somewhat perplexed and amused pains with his clothes. If this sort of thing pleased Jill, obviously there was something in it. Jill never called for the incense of folly.

Everything, in short, that Fred did, he did in the first instance for Jill's sake. His other motives were subordinate and all the unconscious outcome of Jill. The hardest task she had yet imposed upon his chivalrous spirit was to keep away from her, and for this Jill gave him but scant thanks. Whilst he was fretting to be beside her, striving in his industrious way after forgetfulness and a more ample civility towards girls, before whom, had he yielded to nature, he would incontinently have fled, Jill was going to and fro upon the island, restlessly resenting his unaccountable absence, and from time to time writing him notes that sparkled with malice and a loneliness he dared not fill.

"And with this confounded bacon-curing business spoiling the thought of London for the poor little thing," said Fred to himself drearily, as he fastened a skate upon a shapely foot. It reminded him in an inferior sort of way of the delicate slender arch of Jill's instep, whereupon he made an irrelevant remark and tightened the wrong strap. With the smile of a cherub the girl plumped down the outer edge of her skate upon his clumsy hand, and apologised with pathetic politeness.

The slight action was more severely reminiscent of Jill even than the trim foot. Fred sprang up with a merry laugh that gave promise of better things, but he forgot the strap, and the offended lady, having had enough of genius for the moment, marched off with a fool. Thus was Jill for ever coming between Fred and his material prospects. For the lady, herself of undistinguished stock, loved scholarship when coupled with an ancient name, and was heiress to thirty thousand pounds.

In the meantime Jill preserved her hands intact to future generations, and Grandmother Devereux, for Jill's sake, confined hers nightly in the miserable captivity of chamois-leather gloves, besides conscientiously straightening out her bent back upon a hard mattress, instead of huddling down in comfortable slackness into her soft feather bed.

And short, buoyant vigorous letters came fitfully from Jerry, breathing love, devotion, and a sublime assurance.

But the long winter was over at last and spring singing in the air.

It was the day before the great journey to London, and Mrs. Devereux was sitting at her fateful round table. She had closed the windows carefully and drawn the curtains, and sat in a great flare of candle-light counting her hoards. The bacon trade had thriven in her capable hands; and the novelty and relief of receiving prompt post-office orders instead of poetical excuses as honest value for her honest goods, had in part compensated her for the degradation inseparable, in her mind, from any commercial undertaking.

Now as she added up and deducted, it struck her with mounting spirit that perhaps it would not be necessary after all to touch that other hoard in the old safe she had again been gathering up steadfastly; that now at last she might get back her sight. Her state of semi-blindness mortified and humiliated this proud old woman mightily. So she packed her treasure away in a little old velvet bag and the next day they set forth for London—Honora and the five family hair trunks in tow.

Honora, who until this fateful jaunt had never ventured farther than to such of the mainland houses as her mistress permitted herself to sleep in, caused Mrs. Devereux on the whole more anxiety than all the baggage put together. The striking appearance of that venerable pile protected itself, but Honora, used to leisurely ways, stood aghast before the bellowing roar of the vast foreign crowd, and suffered grievously from heart-spasms, while her bonnet unloosed the submerged humour of the British railway porter.

The ruthless, purposeless haste apparent in every action of this doughty person, outraged and annoyed Mrs. Devereux indeed, but in no sort of way did it discompose her mind. Her unmoved bearing in the face of untoward and ineffectual speed impressed all beholders.

Right from the start Jill was set rigorously aside with the dressing-case, the cash-box in its black bag, and a large casket of deeds and mortgages. Mrs. Devereux liked to travel with all her valuables. Jill took careful notes upon each detail of the lively panorama, and soon found that she was a born traveller, and if called upon would be quite equal to pilot any amount of handmaids and hair trunks to the ends of the earth. The thing needed no practice. Directly she felt fully assured of this fact, she no longer resented inaction. She was quite content to sit idle and enjoy the rush and the roar and all the abounding humours of the situation. She was going out into the wide world. Already could she feel herself waking up and growing—growing.

The mere fact of sweeping past great reaches of woods and running waters, houses, grey and red-roofed, peeping steeples and shining, golden, still pools, on, on, through a pleasant land towards the great goal, was ecstasy enough for Jill.

The dulness of the Ebury Street rooms dashed her courage a little, but it revived a thousand-fold when, upon the evening of their arrival, she stood up as straight as a pine to receive the appraisal of Lawrence Devereux's wicked, cool old eyes; and the valuation at an end, the look upon his bland countenance made her voice ring like silver.

"Shall I do?" she asked.

Her conquering eyes hardly paused upon him; they were looking out towards dazzling unknown worlds far beyond the ken of Lawrence.

"You'll do," said he, with a gallant bow, "unless you do for yourself, that is. There's crass folly somewhere at the root of all the Devereuxs, and the Drakes cannot be said to have introduced much wisdom into them. You've done your duty by her, ma'am," he continued, in his courteous way, turning

to his mother. "But honest plain-speaking among friends may, on occasion, be both kind and well-bred. That gown won't do."

"The lace is, I am told, priceless," said Mrs. Devereux haughtily.

"Quite so, when touched by the hand of an expert. Simplicity is the prerogative of an innocence leavened by potential malice. My beautiful young relative, plainly, must stick to simplicity, but it must be simplicity of the highest order, with underlying suggestions of complexity—like the innocence," said Lawrence, with the faded old satyr grin that had in its day figured bravely as a radiant smile. "Take my advice, my dear mother, plunge, and plunge at once. Take her and the priceless lace to Paquin; you'll never regret it."

"Paquin?" repeated Mrs. Devereux.

"Grandmother Devereux," broke in Jill, in a scornful voice —unless when under the direct fire of his flattering glance, she resented oddly the fact of Captain Devereux's being Jerry's father; there were moments when she could see Jerry in him—"we know enough to be quite sure that whoever he is he's extremely expensive. Directly I look round I can settle the lace myself."

"While you are looking round, my dearest girl, you may possibly be seen," said Lawrence, with his inimitable bow. "It is only to those who escape observation that women forgive anything, and a young reputation lies largely in women's hands. I hardly think that any of us would care to blazon forth the ravages made by defalcating tenants in the family fortunes in our—ahem—shoulder-knots," he said, with a dreamy glance at Jill, "especially upon the occasion of our girl's first march-past. Dear me, is that Honora I see on the landing?" he cried, tripping out to press her hand. "My good Honora, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure." He straightened his gold pince-nez and took a benevolent survey of the scene, and the prehistoric hair trunks. "By George!" he murmured, walking gingerly away from the draught, "how my youth

comes rollicking back to me! How deliciously quaint it all is! Pity, my dear little cousin, that quaintness isn't your cachet. There's no denying it's a saving."

"The farms do not perhaps let to such advantage as they used to do," said Mrs. Devereux, in a quiet voice, but with two bright burning spots on her cheeks, "however, I certainly have no thought of saving in necessary things. I had indeed meant to consult you and ascertain from you the best place to take Jill to for those things we could not procure in the country. We'll go to this Paquin person to-morrow, although personally, if there's one creature upon this earth I loath and detest more than another it's a man-milliner. I firmly believe the ignoble reptile to be a sign of the times."

This was Grandmother Devereux's way of protesting. Her heart had been bounding with pride in Jill and in her stiff little white silk frock with its decorations of beautiful lace spread out with conscientious precision, lest the full effect of any stitch might haply be lost. Now the poor tired heart was quiet enough, and Mrs. Devereux was wondering what new depths of selfishness might not be underlying Lawrence's reflective and costly interest in his son's betrothed. She thought also with a swift pang of her little hoard in the velvet bag.

Jill's protest took a less cultured turn. With the curtest of good-nights she flounced off to bed.

"For many seasons I haven't seen so good a speculation as that young vixen," said Lawrence, with unruffled amiability.

"I don't propose speculating with Jill," retorted his mother.

"The good God disposes occasionally even when we don't propose. By the sheer nature of things the girl's a speculation. What are we after all, root and branch, but penniless adventurers, the lot of us?" Mrs. Devereux winced visibly. "Jill is on her promotion. Leave *her* to nature; it's very telling in a girl of her courage, but *we* must act like human beings."

"You are aware, surely, Lawrence, that Jill is engaged—tacitly, of course—to your son? I would permit of no recognised betrothal."

"I am aware, my dear lady, that history is repeating itself, and two young fools suffering the penalty of idleness, propinquity, a superfluity of fresh air, and a pair of unimpaired livers—the underlying cause of many tragedies."

"Lawrence! Do you disapprove then?"

"Of the phase? I never venture to oppose nature, much less to judge her. Give them their heads by all means. We may remember at the same time, putting sentiment aside, that we are called upon to act as stewards, not only in regard to our other assets, but also to our children; that it is our duty—to use a pastoral phrase fallen lately into undeserved opprobrium—to farm out our children to their own best advantage. Jerry, as it happens, might marry any one; and Jill, if I'm not mistaken, unlike the average portionless vestal, may be the chooser—not the chosen. I doubt, under the circumstances, if it's a good investment on either side," said Lawrence blandly, stroking his shapely leg.

"The awkward thing is," said Mrs. Devereux dryly, "that they love one another, like fools, if you will; but in all other respects they are neither of them lacking either in intelligence or in resolution."

"They are both modern, at any rate; and modern love, thank God, is a spirit with unclipped wings and a gift for selection."

"It's curious to think of you, Lawrence, as a little child," said Mrs. Devereux presently in a low, weary voice.

"So I find it myself," said Lawrence airily, but with a thoughtful glance at her. "For some time past, therefore, I have given up meddling with the past. It strikes me nowadays as somewhat of an impertinence."

Mrs. Devereux's calm hands jerked slightly in her lap, and Lawrence pulled himself up with a vigour he had long forgotten.

"Not on your part, mother! You couldn't think I meant that?" he said, with genuine feeling. "I believe," he added slowly—"I believe that you are the best woman I have ever known."

Mrs. Devereux was trembling a little, and years of self-sacrifice were blotted out for her in that one little sentence.

Lawrence had ample reasons of his own for distrusting domestic sentiment, however. He had in the irresponsible past put the maternal goodness to somewhat severe tests. He hurried back therefore to the practical present.

"Jill appears to me to be a wide-eyed young woman with a considerable amount of demand about her. Her allotted portion of original sin must also, I fear, be considerably hampered by the evangelical outlook. Do you think she would be—ahem!—a restful wife for Jerry?"

Mrs. Devereux got white.

"Jill will demand no more than she has a right to demand from any decent man. Can Jerry give her this?" she demanded gravely.

"Dear me! Trust a real good woman to fly to the worst conclusions! The virtuous woman seems to have no trust whatsoever either in man or nature."

"Her trust in both has been tried a good deal, perhaps?"

"Possibly. But her trust in herself must be sublime and somewhat blood-curdling to induce her to trust herself to either of them. I have no reason to fear that Jerry is a saint. But, as a man, he does very well."

Mrs. Devereux searched her son's countenance, and she knew that this time he spoke the truth.

"At the same time," he calmly continued, "Jerry has broken away from a distracting soil and the hampering traditions of an obsolete family honour, and he's going to be a millionaire. I see a rectitude unappeased and racy of the soil in the young lady's fine eyes; and to-day, as in the days of Adam, we need a help-meet, not a skid."

The back of Lawrence's neck was incredibly thin. Mrs. Devereux's heart was melting miserably as she looked at it, but she cast off her weakness.

"I have yet to learn that a skid, as you call it—when will slang cease to torment?—uses itself. In my experience men don't put their wives to such wholesome uses."

"You undervalue the sensitiveness of men," said Lawrence languidly. "The mere expression of an eyelid may grind back a man's progress as surely as any restraining arm could do. Brute force is a fool to a witless conscience."

"Any conscience that can help a man from falling headlong into the tricks of trade must surely have some wit in it."

"Jerry could never fall headlong into anything. His head is far too steady with climbing up hill towards success."

"That," said the lady, "may make quite as large demands upon a witless conscience. However, I could wish Jill's conscience preserved to keep herself in the right way, not engaged in doing any man's dirty work. A man should have sufficient pride and self-respect to perform his own menial tasks for himself."

"You have the sense of a dozen women, mother, but let us get back to our vestal virgin. If Jill wants Sandford and Merton commercial morality, she'd better stick to a home-grown Irishman, or search the provinces diligently till she find him."

He yawned behind his delicate hand and stood up to ease a twitch of lumbago.

"I wish to the Lord I had left Jill at home," said Mrs. Devereux bitterly. "And on the whole I'm truly thankful that Jerry is in Africa. He'll do better, I doubt, without a father's guidance."

"Jerry is sustained and comforted by the spirit of the age, dearest lady. He requires no fatherly guidance. Besides, I gave him up to you in time. You'll give me that much credit at least. It was not, you'll believe me, entirely to escape his keep or his inconvenience during those lean years," said Lawrence musingly. He paused to look at her. "It's difficult to explain this to you. To the single mind mixed motives may ——"

"Don't trouble to expound them, my son. I understand you. As soon as a woman has ceased to coddle and kiss her children she feels empty and void, and to console herself starts to try to understand them. Sometimes she succeeds, but it

takes her a lifetime to do it, and it is not always a profitable pursuit. You spoke just now as though the lean years were over. How is that? Have you found honest employment?"

"Happily, yes. I have just been appointed secretary to an unexceptionable club, one of the few comfortable refuges for attenuated blue blood left us, and fairly lucrative. Were I not dunned beyond the last resisting point, I should gladly help you with Jill."

"There is no reason whatsoever that you should help me with Jill. That is my affair. I shall be glad to think of you in the discharge of your liabilities."

"It will be a new point of view, certainly," said Lawrence, with his affable grin. "Jill, I presume, will be ready by the end of the week. In view of eventualities I have told every one that you would not arrive until Saturday."

"Is not this a waste of lies, and an injustice to yourself, since neither Jill nor I can support your assertions. Lies that are found out seem to me a symptom of failing intelligence. You may be imperilling a valuable reputation."

"I can easily put that all right," said Lawrence pleasantly.

"I doubt it," said his mother, "with me to deal with."

Lawrence was chuckling as he went out of the door. When he had gone Mrs. Devereux fell together curiously, and the fierce passion of grief in her tearless eyes only burnt itself out after a long vigil.

Just as the dawn broke she crept noiselessly to her room and shivered dumbly down in her bed, trying hard to pray.

CHAPTER XIII

JILL had already gathered in much knowledge. She had been at several receptions, a great concert, and a stately dinner or so; but this was the night of her first ball. She had been at the open window looking out at the twinkling lights and the great glimmering sea of roofs, drinking in that throbbing roar of a vast multitude which makes for madness in the blood. She was now standing out in the room in her Paquin dress. It clung round her white and soft and simple, the heirloom of lace giving its one indescribable exquisite hint of unobtrusive amplitude. Her dark hair was caught neat and trim into its small knot. She had the face and gallant bearing of a delectable boy, a mind compounded of dreams and impishness. But few in so stale and wicked a world would have paused to take note of the elfish unwomanly gleam in those wide honest grey eyes.

So soon as Mrs. Devereux, however, had drunk in greedily the naïve surprise of Jill's perfection, so surely did her pondering gaze fix itself serenely upon the one weak point.

"You're delirious with the vanity of the play-actor, Jill," she said, with soft distinctness.

Jill clapped her hands.

"That's it," she murmured. "It's like standing up before a first-night's audience to be judged, like that woman on Thursday."

"The judgment-seat of fools ——"

"Grandmother! That's not fair! They can't be fools. There's the wisdom and the experience, and the beauty and the riches, of the whole wide world behind those people. All that must swamp their folly, and—and take all the commonness out of it. Besides, the very thought of the verdict of fools couldn't make you fairly shiver with life, make you absolutely determined to do your best—to do justice to yourself. You

feel it yourself," she cried accusingly, "you do! You never looked like that at home. It's the same velvet and the same lace and the old star—I remember them all since I was born—but it's not the same you."

"Had I been a golden vessel of virtue within," said her grandmother suddenly, "and without a fright, you'd have resented it bitterly. Wouldn't you, Jill?"

Jill turned her frank clear eyes upon the magnificent old woman.

"Well, yes, I suppose I should."

Mrs. Devereux had no further comment to make, so Jill went on hurriedly:

"It's because we have something to go fast at, at last, and we've been creeping all these years and just stepping over things. And you get so tired of creeping and of the little bothers—to feel awful if any one spills tea on your one clean frock, or treads bread and butter into the carpet—to have to hate that converted Roman Catholic of a baker thing because he *sees* the penny you put into the poor-box."

"I am thankful to say, Jill, I have never sunk to such depths as these you mention."

"But I have! I always seem to have to match my surroundings. It's lovely here. It's lovely to be able to keep your pangs and heart-burnings for things that matter."

"Take care," said her grandmother solemnly, "that they're not required for things that damn."

"Things that damn," said Jill, with as deep a gravity, "at least amuse. At any rate they surely must excite."

"We have still half an hour to wait. Your dress requires nothing further. Kindly sit down, Jill, and compose yourself."

Jill had been sitting down for a full ten minutes before she spoke again, but apparently she had not yet composed herself. There were questions shooting out of her eyes.

"I wish I didn't detest that island," she said at last, "in just the way I do. I have a sort of an idea it's low. If there's anything in you to stretch it ought to stretch anywhere. Look at you, after thirteen children and counting dirty clothes

every single Monday of your life! I—I couldn't possess my soul in patience like that—no, not to save my life. I must have given in years ago and been a wilted tragic rag."

"Breeding goes for something, Jill."

"I have breeding, and I couldn't do it."

"But I had also love," said Mrs. Devereux, lifting her head with a great dignity. "I knew what my husband would wish me to do, and how he would wish me to look."

"So have I love!" protested Jill, with one of her rare blushes, neck, cheeks, brow flooding up all as red as a May sunset.

"You are loyal to Jerry, of that I have no doubt. But as for love—you're too busy feeling about after yourself for love. Love is a self-less emotion."

There was mutiny made evident in every inch of Jill. She fascinated even her grandmother.

"But how can it possibly be? Love is yourself—it's you! You must be thinking of yourself. Why should your one object in life be to thwart yourself and make yourself wretched by doing without all the things you want? Love is a delight, not a penance!"

"Love is not the music of a tin-kettle, I can assure you, Jill. It's the quickener of the clod. It's a great and an enduring thing and holds in its heart infinite sorrow. And no woman yet created knows what love is until she's first learnt the meaning of sacrifice."

"It's not necessary to follow other people's lead. I don't feel the least like a woman. Perhaps I can enjoy love and elude sacrifice."

"You can't elude being a woman. If nothing else will bring you to your senses, take my word for it your sex will, and some day, my fine young madam, it will be wringing your withers for you."

This silenced Jill for a little, but she was simmering with excitement, and felt now quite sure of the attention of her audience. The thoughts in her rampant young brain had to break into words, and her attitude towards her

grandmother was one of frank dislike, frank admiration, and infinite trust.

"There's one thing I wish I could elude, and I can't—Cousin Lawrence says it's the one dowdy thing about me and must be overcome."

"May I inquire if you're crazy, Jill? Will you kindly explain to what you allude?"

"Oh, of believing acutely, you know, in the devil. It seems to cramp you in dreadfully. I don't suppose I could ever have detested the island and general dulness in the vulgar way I do," she paused to sigh, "if I hadn't been brought up with the devil."

"You may thank God, Jill, that you have been brought up with the devil, for never in my born days have I seen a girl who so emphatically calls for the restraining influence of one. I wish Lawrence would mind his own business," she thought wrathfully. "I couldn't have believed that even he would have tried to corrupt the girl's mind in this way."

"Stick to your belief in the devil, Jill," she said earnestly, "I fear you'll want it all."

"It's rather degrading, don't you think? People seem so happy without him. He takes your courage away."

"Whatever he does, he's at the root of England's greatness. The Anglo-Saxons of all people on earth require a deterrent of an—ahem!—brutal nature. This modern notion of being above a devil makes me fairly sick. It's all slothfulness and slackness. The present generation blinks fact and desires neither incentive nor spur to right action. It prefers to drift. They've got rid of the devil and the stocks and flogging in board schools, and now they want to abolish hanging and the bishops. I'd like to know what we're coming to next."

"It seems curious," said Jill equably, pursuing her own train of thought, "that the devil should so often seem to take reasonable views of things."

Mrs. Devereux was consumed with anxiety, but she retained all her calm.

"Do you think that God would have degraded the reason

of man by setting it in strife against a fool? Have you no respect for yourself, Jill? Do you desire to wage war against a nine-pin? Thank God the very thought of that wily old serpent rouses every drop of fighting blood in me."

"What's that I hear of fighting?" said Lawrence, his familiar wise old satyr grin appearing suddenly in the door-way. For some minutes past he had with great relish and enlightenment been drinking in the theological discussion.

Jill sprang to her feet, and dropping a sweeping curtsey, frankly demanded tribute, every vestige of dreaminess swept clean off her brilliant boyish face. Lawrence nodded and laughed.

"Serpents!" he said at last; "when we have Jill to think of—Jill, with all her powers set free, in a Paquin gown, and the world before her! The world and the flesh and the devil! Ah, Jill, he may be dowdy, and we may flout and defy him," said this hoary sinner, "but, like the poor and the plumber, he's always with us, and where you are," he muttered, "he'll never be far distant. Come! We must seize the right moment to arrive," he said briskly; the longer he examined Jill the better an investment did he find her, and already had she helped to knit up his own somewhat ravelled reputation. "We must launch Jill upon the world before bad champagne and worse epigrams have muddled the wits of her audience. Jill, I notice, calls for an alert and unobscured intelligence. She's not been made for the faded hours."

He gave an amused shrug, and chuckled under his breath in a subterraneous way he had.

"Oh, by the way, have you heard Fred Morton's news?" he said, when, with the dexterity of a practised hand, he had arranged his feminine freight in the carriage, and they were off. "He'll be the next interesting *débutant* into this bewitching vale of tears. Both old Kendrick's nephews went down in the *Corinne*, and Fred's the next heir. He was wired for to-day. I met him at the station just now. He said he had written to you. Prosperity suits the fellow. I remember him a slouching lout. He looked this evening as though quite at home in his *rôle* of heir to a peerage."

The news was too great to be received without a secret gasp from both the women, but Jill soon roused herself.

"Fred is used to honours," she said with melodious arrogance, "and he hasn't slouched for a year."

"Ho, ho!" thought Lawrence, "this is how the wind blows, then. It might do very well, too. The time may come when Jerry will want to be buttressed up by an assured income and a family not on its last legs."

"I was certainly very agreeably surprised in Fred's bearing," he resumed, with the slightly paternal air he occasionally permitted himself. He had to be careful in this regard, however, lest he should be betrayed into the bottomless pit of the heavy father. "I always thought most highly of Fred's attainments, as, of course, we all did, but he struck me as being singularly wanting in form. It's never quite fair, it would seem, to judge a hobbledehoy. Now he's really a fine young fellow."

Mrs. Devereux was conscientiously and generously glad of Fred's rise in life, just as she had been conscientiously and generously glad of his scholastic honours and achievements; but there was no catch in her throat, no tears in her heart as at the most ordinary note from Jerry. Her uppermost feeling indeed was blank astonishment that any son of hers could be such a snob as to affect an interest in a peer's heir whom, as a pauper, he had utterly ignored; in fact, upon occasion actively resented. Lawrence liked the family disbursements to remain strictly within the family circle, and, as he had pointed out, Fred after all was a mere outside pauper. Mrs. Devereux was not entirely ignorant of the world or its ways, but she expected the Devereux blood to be equal at least to avoiding the grosser vulgarities incidental to these ways. There being, therefore, such a number of apt things pertinent to be said on the subject, Mrs. Devereux decided to say nothing. Jill, however, had no wisdom to counsel silence, and she hated snobs.

"I can't understand why you should be so surprised about Fred, Cousin Lawrence," she said, in the contained, unemotional voice of her grandmother, which, in spite of himself, caused

Lawrence to grin in his corner. "You could hardly have seen him. You always looked past him and acted as if he were something unpleasant you were too polite to notice. Fred always used to feel as though he were a fly that had settled on your nose when you were speaking to a duchess, you know, and you didn't like to remove it."

"That, I presume, was your simile, not Fred's. Imagination is not, I should think, Fred's strong point. Fred, my dear girl, to those unused to him, was a difficult boy to get at; your grandmother, moreover, had perhaps already rather too many responsibilities of her own to contend with," he murmured virtuously, "without assuming those of other people. Those fitted to judge were of opinion, my dearest mentor, that Lord Kendrick should have come to the assistance of his great-nephew."

Captain Devereux spoke with the gentle tolerance which at rare moments replaced his habit of amused cynicism. Jill's spirit soared gaily. She felt that in some small degree she had avenged Fred.

"I wonder if Lord Kendrick enjoys himself very much," said she, with renewed cheerfulness. "He's enormously good, isn't he?" she added, with a wistful, inquiring look. "He mightn't mind dying much. If he didn't, it would be delightful to see Fred being a real peer, treading on the toes of an admiring crowd—nothing makes Fred so clumsy as to praise him up with an object—and to see him getting away from a whole room full of objects! Dear me, I hope his uncle won't last very long!"

"This young woman," thought Lawrence, not unkindly, "will never do for Jerry. Indeed, she'll have to exhaust herself considerably upon impartial objects before she'll do for any man."

"I am led to suppose," said Grandmother Devereux, "that the glib utterance of heartless inanity is part of the equipment of the modern young woman. If you fail in all else, Jill, you will at least succeed in this."

"With knowledge comes charity," said Lawrence gently

"When Jill knows that old Kendrick clings to this devastating valley of iniquity with all the tenacity of an evangelical whimpering for Paradise and the initiatory worm, she would, I feel, be the last to dislodge him from his parlous perch. In bringing Jill to London, my dear mother," said he, as they went up a stately staircase; "you have shown, as always, an acute perception of the right course. No other corner of the civilised globe could have tired out such indefatigable energies."

"Lawrence, is it any use my asking you not to make Jill more like a purposeful porcupine than she is at present?"

"Who am I, dear lady, to make or mar such nimble and dangerous forces? The winnowing of the fires of time and the emotions, her own and those of her victims—more especially the latter—will alone compose Jill. I'll do my best for her and look on. Honestly, without any thought of irreverence, in your case I should be inclined to pray for Jill."

"That," said Mrs. Devereux, with a flash of grim humour —"that makes Jill hopeless! So she tells me."

"Ha! You mustn't make Jill hopeless, then. Hope is an ill thing to tamper with."

The old woman glanced at the immaculate but empty-looking coat of her son and later on in the evening, when she had time, it was for Lawrence she prayed and not for Jill; so pitifully natural does it come for a woman to pray for those in whom personally she has lost all trust. Meanwhile she drew herself to her full height, and prepared with sublime confidence to lead Jill into that great whirling mystery of a world which had sapped the hope and the youth and the strength of Lawrence.

And presently Jill was swept off upon rather a diffident arm. Its owner had only just returned from a three years' extinction in a forgotten colony and was disposed to the reverential worship of all things fresh and fragrant, more especially of girls. When Mrs. Devereux was free to dispose of herself she took a few leisurely and careful observations and then joined the cohort of waiting matrons spread out in pompous patience

against the walls, and with great edification drank in their artless and unrestrained prattle. Since each lady uttered all her sentiments at the top of her aristocratic voice, the country observer collected not a little information, and with a sigh of relief ascertained likewise, from indirect evidence, that the immemorial velvet passed muster. What she did not know was that the piece of lace pointed over her abundant hair and tied exquisitely under her chin was taken a note of by more than one bejewelled dame. Later Mrs. Devereux discovered an old acquaintance or so amongst the gorgeous throng, and while still bristling with her experience had the happiness of expounding some of her views upon it to an enthralled audience.

As for Jill, she danced upon air, and used to boys as she was, and little more herself, in many regards, than a boy of a nipping, eager, and understanding turn of mind, while yet a girl to her finger-tips, she made many friends amongst her partners, and that first night she gathered in a host of secrets. The more experienced gentlemen who stood about the doors in magnificent inaction commended, indeed, the gay and gallant bearing of the young explorer, but mistrusted the obvious lack of sentiment in her mien. It looked like art, and since each of the jaded crowd supposed himself to be suffering in some form or another from the results of art in woman, he was generally looking about after nature, and as frequently missing her. That section of her audience, therefore, reserved its decision. But collectively it looked nice, and individually it reminded her of Jerry when he first came back breathing out languid, unobtrusive, yet ineradicable vainglory and with a melancholy outlook. She felt sure that she could cope with it in a general sort of way, both collectively and individually, and after a few weeks' conscientious effort the result began to justify her temerity. No human man could withstand Jill's absorbed, enjoyable interest in him. Nor was there a morsel of false pride about Jill, for, indeed, personally she knew nothing of the all-embracing intellect of woman.

If she did not absolutely understand any subject, she

unhesitatingly demanded a copious and exhaustive explanation of it. In this matter a young man will always be glad to oblige a girl, and Jill was altogether too much in earnest to give way to any flippant interruptions. Through her ignorance, besides, was she learning wherein her wisdom lay, and directly she had reached any desired point she could she was well aware find ample opportunities in the after-remarks for airing her inlying spirit of mockery.

Having thus mastered the elements of man Jill began to get extremely curious about woman. So much seemed to hinge on her. Finding out, therefore, what she was after, boys contributed their sisters, men brought up straggling contingents of those beings who had interpreted life to them—that is to say, taught them the meaning and value of disappointment—whilst a few, more reckless than the rest, presented Jill to a selection of young married women.

The moderation in her emotions put these ladies off at once, it was so like their own. Her searching gaze disturbed their serenity. They tried to freeze her into insignificance and failed. Whereupon, having acquired husbands, and with them some sense of humour, they laughed a little. And could a young married woman have hated anything of such small account as a girl, possibly one or two of them might have hated Jill blandly. As it was, they found a languid interest in watching her. Certain of them, indeed, went the length of abusing her to their husbands, but they were spiritless creatures given over to babies, who had lost all their nerves and most of their self-respect.

The old ladies frankly liked Jill. She suggested to them possibilities of some future scandal. It was only amongst girls that she failed to do herself justice. Girls baffled her. They brought her ignorance home to her. She knew nothing of that life they lived with such pleasant complacence. She made pathetic efforts to grasp and understand, but on the whole she was at this period lonely in the company of girls, and an outsider, not altogether unlike a sensitive boy caught and held amidst a cloud of femininity in a bonnet shop.

Girls made Jill look awkward and feel hot. Before she had been in their company for five minutes she was scarlet. Girls on their part could not make her out, and what their brothers could see in her was quite beyond them. Ascertaining this by chance Jill roused herself to teach them. Having a geniune respect for any proficient in well-grounded knowledge not her own, the note of respect with which she addressed girls was wholly genuine and touched their natural desire for novelty.

They were anxious, moreover, to find out how she managed to make their masculine relatives feverish, melancholy, and eager to waste valuable afternoons in ugly "apartments." They accepted, therefore, with some alacrity the diffident invitations Jill gave them to her little teas. Being hospitable even with tea and toast was a new delight to Jill, so she was hospitable delightfully and in rather a new way. As her knowledge of them increased, moreover, her awe of girls began to weaken, she gained in composure, ceased to blush, and was soon exploring amongst them thoughtfully in order to discover if possible wherein lay their superiority to herself.

They seemed to her upon closer inspection to be parcelled out in lots, each dominated by some ruling taste. They all thought seriously of incomes and position, and in a lesser degree of men. Unlike her, they hated nothing in a vulgar way. Their mothers amused them, and they had all a mild taste in religion. They rarely jeered. That privilege seemed to belong alone to the young married woman. They appeared to have absorbed a great deal, these ladies. What most astonished Jill was that although no girl of her acquaintance seemed quite big enough to hold anything particular outside her own line, that glittering being, the young married woman, although presumably the same age, was an emporium which apparently held all knowledge. Marriage seemed to be a delightfully expanding process.

"What surprises me more than anything else," said Jill, in a sudden burst of confidence to three girls who had outstayed the others one day after tea; "is how extraordinary little you

seem really to know about men, although you're evidently generally thinking of them. I suppose," she pursued musingly, "it's because you're too taken up in trying to be young married women yourselves and do just exactly what you like, to bother about men, except just as a means to an end."

"Really, Jill, that's not very polite; and what do you know yourself about men?"

"Oh, there's no hurry about me. I have plenty of time to watch them. Besides, I'm engaged to one. That teaches you."

"You're engaged, and you never told us! Oh, what is he?"

"So far he's not much," said Jill modestly. "He's made thirty thousand pounds in mines and means to be a millionaire. Later on, from what I can see," she said, her eyes lighting up brilliantly, "he'll go in for politics. It's such a big sort of thing, there's so much room in it—especially for common sense—that Jerry will be sure to like it. No one would care to go and swim in a bucket, you see, if he could get a lake."

"To be engaged before you're out! It's so odd!"

An assenting murmur arose from the others and they all examined Jill closely.

"That's what accounts for you, then," said Muriel Fawcett. "That's what makes you so cool, and telling, and good-natured, you know."

Ellen Lascelles, a big-eyed, wistful creature with a suggestion of romance in every trait, came closer to look at Jill.

"It must be delightful to be engaged before you're out," she murmured, in her low, mysterious voice. "It leaves you so absolutely free to enjoy yourself. It must really be almost as nice as being a very young widow, and much more original. Besides, you needn't wear black and go just to matinées."

After this, Jill's little tea-parties became quite a feature in her small corner of the great world.

CHAPTER XIV

For a whole month Jill drank up joy in great gulps without one halt, and every week she vividly reproduced it all in her letters to Jerry.

By this time she had found out a great deal in regard to other men, and was absolutely confirmed in her conviction that Jerry and she together could beat them all. Sometimes when she thought of the delights they would have together—Jerry and she—when he came home, and of all there was waiting to be done, and they two alone in the whole wide world destined to do it, she would grow a little delirious with happiness. But since, when this mood overtook her, she only looked just a little more elfish and glancing than usual, she exhilarated rather than depressed those artless young gentlemen so pathetically willing to take Jerry's place; and girls began to have their doubts as to the stability of the engagement and its comparative harmlessness. Such a wicked waste of purposeless sparkle so early in the season, with the whole of May and June still to contend with, hardly seemed credible, much less quite straight.

Several girls looked coldly upon Jill. But her grandmother found her out, and, armed with her knitting, sat down on a certain troublous warm spring day to consider the matter fairly.

"This unwholesome state of flippant excitement, then, is love, I suppose," she observed. "I'm beginning to hate the very sound of the word, it's so often a libel upon one's intelligence. Call it a possession, if you will, or an infatuation, or diseased imagination, but—love!"

"And yet it is love," said Jill.

"Of that you, of all people, are in no position to judge. You remind me of some heathenish fire-spirit, Jill. I read a story of one once that loved a Christian. She blew upon his foolish brain until she influenced it and his passion for herself to a

sort of demoniacal energy. He certainly returned the creature's attachment with a will, and gained vast glory and renown in all the amazing enterprises he attempted. The two enjoyed themselves immensely and disorganised the whole community, for somehow the brilliancy in the enterprises scorched every one concerned. And presently the husband began to feel empty and unpleasantly hot within, and he found at last that his fine fire-wife had burnt out his heart and all the kindnesses out of all the schemes. He had, at least, been good-natured before she met him. In the end, he was, I believe, left howling outside the gates of Paradise for his beautiful lost heart,—and much good that did him! The lady, in the meantime, shot up the chimney in a yellow flame. A pretty legend, to be sure, to feel called upon to offer to the serious consideration of any girl not yet nineteen!"

"But it doesn't apply. I couldn't consider it seriously."

"Have I ever yet made a false accusation against any one of you?"

"Never! Still, you're ambitious yourself——"

"Love ought to be strong enough to ease even the ache of ambition. In any case," she continued hastily, "ambition should spring out of love, not love out of ambition."

"They can spring together, and grow up side by side."

"In a woman love must always step softly in advance of everything. The leader must be love, otherwise she's a flame-wife, or a domestic flail. Man is a weak vessel," said Mrs. Devereux oracularly.

"A woman can strengthen him."

"That depends altogether upon how much of her is self and how much love."

"A woman all love would be simply unbearable. Grandmother Devereux, you're thinking of Byron's poems."

"If Byron didn't know what he was talking about, I'd like to know who did. I have lived a long life in this whirlpool of weak vessels," she pursued, "and man is now precisely what he was when I first began to watch him, and I have watched him closely. I doubt, indeed, if he's so exceedingly unlike

Adam, even after all these toiling centuries, as he'd wish us to suppose."

"At least women are extremely unlike Eve."

"More's the pity, then! There was nothing at least of the schoolmistress, or that outrageous modern vagary, the female admirable Crichton, about Eve. She was young and loving and acted like a fool. It was for her husband to teach her better. But what, after all, could you expect from a man absolutely without experience, who spent his time lolling in a garden? There's quite enough Eve about you to call for some one with a great deal more common sense than ever Adam had. And Jerry is only Adam with a modern education."

"I understand Jerry."

"It would be more to the purpose if you had faith in him. You'll neither give yourself nor any one else peace, my good girl, until you've learnt absolute faith in some one, which alone will succeed in weakening that in yourself. This groundless self-confidence of yours is, to my mind, absolutely impious."

"It's not in myself. It's in Jerry and me together."

"What about Jerry without you?"

Jill started, but she said nothing.

"Ah! You have never thought of him as a self-supporting structure. If I were a little wiser, or a little more of a fool, perhaps, I might hope. But you understand too much for any fallible old woman! Jill, you were never made to be a hop-pole for a permanency. At first you'd like it. You always did like undertaking other people's business. But you'd feel weak one day and want propping yourself. You'd want a little time in which to pause and sigh and weep a little, perhaps, upon your own account. It's a moment that comes to every woman, and you're as irrational at heart as Eve herself. And then—then in your ingrained wilfulness you'd be turning to mock at the poor hop."

"Grandmother Devereux, you underrate us both," said Jill passionately.

"On the contrary, Jill, it's you who underrate both yourself and Jerry. You'll have to be fairly afraid of a man's goodness

before you'll ever really love him. It's difficult to cow you, Jill; he'll have to be very good. You have but little imagination, and what you have is morbid, and no womanly softness. Nothing short, therefore, of solid worth will really move you——"

"Grandmother——"

"With mockery at sin tripping off the tongue of every infant—do you imagine I'm deaf, Jill, or a vegetable, and see nothing that's going on?—with, I repeat, flippancy tainting the very air of the place, do you suppose I don't know that solid worth sounds low to any girl of spirit, and must affront her cruelly? I never even suspected you of sense enough to care for worth naked and ungarnished. But surely, in this artistic age, any man with his five senses will have sufficient ingenuity to dress it up until it's presentable."

"I've done nothing all this time," said Jill, after a pause, "but compare Jerry with the others——"

"Very gratifying to the others, no doubt."

"At least, it's gratifying to me. For not one of them comes anywhere near Jerry."

Here Mrs. Devereux began to bristle.

"Possibly your standard, even in this short period, may have become lowered. I see no one here fit even to judge Jerry by."

"You judge them by their slang," said Jill hotly, "and their sleepy ways and their bad epigrams. They're not the least like that themselves. They're as kind as anything, and not the least idiotic, and they couldn't be mean, and they have plenty of—of—submerged courage and activity. They're real good fellows."

"A charming description, truly! Since you do not propose, however, to shape the ends of any of these gentlemen, you can afford to be lenient towards them. It is excellent practice, should you decide to marry Jerry. This acquired faculty may come in useful."

"We'd better not speak of Jerry."

"We can't avoid speaking of Jerry, Jill. Jerry has done

nothing that warrants our excluding him from rational conversation."

She snapped her lips together and went on with her knitting.

Five minutes later there was a slight rustle on the landing, and Fred came in, and the first thing that struck both the vexed women was the quiet look of power about him.

With a stab of irrational anger pricking at either unruly heart, each felt she could trust Fred to the uttermost, and resented the covert insult to Jerry bitterly. They were, however, both too proud and just not to welcome Fred with a little ovation. And directly she had overcome her ill-humour, he touched Jill's dramatic sense, as likewise her sense of proportion. After all, upon a variety of counts, compensation was due to Fred, and, as the centre of interest, in his subdued way he always rather shone.

It invariably exhilarated Jill to be associated in any going concern. There was no doubt, moreover, that Fred had improved marvellously. The way in which he now held himself was beyond reproach.

"If only I could believe in Jerry as I do in him," she thought wistfully; then she began to laugh. She had suddenly caught her grandmother trying to pick holes in Fred, and failing.

The way in which they kept mixing up Jerry and Fred was growing ludicrous. It took the strain off the situation, however, and eased the tightening in Jill's throat. She could talk now quite easily.

"It's three weeks since the funeral, Fred, isn't it. You'll soon be able to enjoy yourself a little openly, won't you?" she asked anxiously.

"I can enjoy myself now, I find, with reservations—at quiet dinners, for example, and at the opera; and I can take you out riding in the Park, or for a day on the river. But nothing ought to tempt me to watch you dancing at any ball for quite three more weeks. My cousins were nothing to me, of course, but they shared my uncle's religious opinions, and he is eminently correct in his conduct, so I can't very well hurt his—sensations."

"Oh," said Jill, with an odd chilled feeling, "I thought he was perhaps going to be a father to you, and be ridiculously proud of you."

"Oh, he's not in the least ridiculously proud of me. I am a dispensation to be endured with prayer, and—well—not fasting; that's a trick of the Papists, isn't it? However, my grandfather is very kind, really. He allows me fifteen hundred a year, and the little property on the Avon—that must have come to me in any case upon John's death—brings in three hundred, so altogether I have nearly two thousand a year."

"Your position will require it all," said Mrs. Devereux promptly. "I should have thought Lord Kendrick would have made you a larger allowance."

"It seems a lot to me," said Fred simply. "I hardly know yet what to do with it. You'll have to teach me, Jill."

"Your own sense of the fitness of things will soon teach you," said Mrs. Devereux, with a sharp glance at him, and a firm resolve that if Jerry were not to be permitted to defray Jill's expenses, it was most certainly out of the question that Fred could do it. "No one knows anything of the way in which money melts until he's begun to write cheques," said she.

"Still, he knows how he can best enjoy himself," said Fred quietly.

Jill could see, however, that his eyes were blinking horribly with fear. She knew Fred's habits.

"You're the only two people here I know properly. You don't want to take all my pleasure in the money away by refusing to enjoy it with me—even just a little? Jill, you'd like to come riding, wouldn't you? You've wanted to ride in the Row ever since you saw a picture in a flamboyant magazine presented by the Fontaines of two Dutch dolls out for a jaunt on two hobby horses, with a fine jumble of admiring faces looking on—and that was exactly ten years ago!"

Jill said nothing. She was trembling with excitement and the joy of revolution. To see Fred growing up audaciously under Grandmother Devereux's very nose, blotted riding sheer out of her head.

"Jill, you do want to ride?"

Jill groped desperately after her dignity, but Fred's face brought out the truth.

"Of course I want to ride."

"Jill's days are already over-full of amusement. I doubt if she'd have time to ride."

"We can get up early," said Fred. "It's the best time."

"Jill, be good enough to fetch my shawl; it's downstairs, I believe. Fred, I think it only right to tell you that Jerry has already offered to give Jill every advantage, and that I have refused his offer."

Fred coloured up to his eyes.

"I knew, of course, he'd have wanted to do it. But she couldn't take it from him."

"Nor from you."

"Yes, she could. I don't matter. The engagement's known. Jerry wouldn't mind, and no one can say anything about our being together. You've given me pretty good proof that I have some claims upon you. In that case I must also have some rights in you and in Jill, as much as in any of you. And," he added boldly, "I mean to stick to my rights till I get them. You've stuck to me through thick and thin all these years. There's no earthly reason you should cast me off now."

"That's not a fair way of putting it."

"I dare say it's not, but even with a woman on the throne," he said, with a laugh, "a fellow must fight for his rights. And after all, all's fair in war. Besides, if I allowed myself to be vanquished in our first passage of arms, you'd never forgive me!"

He was standing close to her now. She could see the gentleness on his dark, nervous face. Poignant consideration for Fred's position as a pauper had become such a part of the nature of Mrs. Devereux that it hampered her at every step. It made it impossible for her to sweep him and his proposals out of her way as she would undoubtedly have done in the case of Jerry. One had to be careful with Fred.

The startling intrusiveness of the young man appalled her, but hardly so much as his face. Such a face upon the part of Fred as applied to her was next door to an impertinence, and yet her old stern compassion for the homeless boy now came up to interfere with her reason and dock her words.

"It's absolutely out of the question, Fred," she said harshly. "I'm astonished at your even proposing such a thing."

"Not half so much astonished as I am myself. It wanted a lot of courage! But now I've begun I must go on, and with Jill on my side I have a strong case. Even if I hadn't, you'll admit I can't funk now. Grandmother Devereux," Fred stooped down brazenly and took firm hold of the old woman's shoulder, "this is the first time I've ever asked you for anything, and if you won't give it to me for that reason, I'll have to snatch it, that's all. You're the bravest woman I've ever known. The height of courage is to know when you're beaten —and—I hear Jill!"

In his consuming nervousness, for to the day of his death Fred could find it in him to tremble in the presence of Grandmother Devereux, he fairly shook her.

Mrs. Devereux broke into a sudden hoarse laugh.

"Ah, well, when it comes to a great boy, six foot two in his stockings, shaking an old woman as though she were a rat, there's no more to be said. It's time she turned her face to the wall, and thought mainly of the next world. She's been plainly proved impotent in this.—You can get Jill a horse, and buy her a habit, for I can do no more."

There was a sudden low wailing break in the proud voice that made Fred shiver.

"I feel an awful beast!" he said quickly.

Mrs. Devereux paused for a second.

"There's no earthly reason you should," said she, sitting up majestically, and resuming her interrupted knitting. "You wouldn't be one of us if you weren't as obstinate as a mule—and—as proud as Lucifer. Jill, I find it useless to contend with two of you. I am too old. I am unfit for scenes or heroics, or modern emotions. They strike me as being some-

what indecent exhibitions. This new world is meant for the young, no doubt. You'd better enjoy it in your own way, so if Fred chooses to mount you, why, let him. To modern notions, there's nothing indecorous in the arrangement." She paused to gather up every shred of her generosity. "If there were, Fred would certainly not have propounded it. Make your own arrangements. I shall go and rest a little."

She threw up her grand old head and towered out of the room like a grenadier.

"Fred—you—you, of all people to conquer her in the end! I'm glad. But oh, doesn't it make you feel sort of awful?" Jill flopped into a chair. "It's like Samson amongst the Philistines, and oh, Fred, you're such an extraordinary Delilah!"

Fred was glowering out of the window with a screwed-up face, in quite his old style.

"It's jolly uncomfortable altogether," said he ruefully. "And you see it's only the beginning."

"The beginning of what?" she inquired, with brilliant eyes. "Are you invading the enemy's country? Is it to be an organised campaign?"

"There are a lot of things," said Fred, "that want seeing to, and she won't give in easily."

"I'm beginning to think there's the making of a soldier in you," said Jill, with an interested glance. It came fatally easy to her to patronise Fred.

"I don't know. You like to get what you want of course. But fighting with women isn't especially pleasant."

"Grandmother Devereux is much more than a woman!"

"Is she? That's one of the things I intend to find out.—It's rather late. They'll be bedding down the horses, Jill. Come out and see the one I've chosen for you."

She started and stared.

"I haven't made my protest yet."

"Don't bother! There's plenty of time. Go and put on your hat."

"Fred," she called back over her shoulder, "did you

ever in your leisure hours happen to practise heaping coals of fire on heads? You do it too beautifully for an amateur."

"Jill, that's not like you."

"It's exactly like me! Besides, it's only due to you to make some protest, and this is mine."

"Jill," he said, when they were out in the street, "when did you hear from Jerry?"

"Last week. He's very busy with a new venture. And Fred, I think he's anxious. I rather wish he'd give up venturing."

"So do I," said Fred promptly. "And," he added hastily, "I wish he'd come home."

They were skirting round a dull, ill-lit square that led to the mews, and a little of her old twilight faith in Fred came creeping back softly to Jill. She drew closer to him and her voice melted. Fred patiently bared his back to the blow.

"I don't know," said Jill thoughtfully, "if I want him to come home, exactly. Perhaps he's not ready. But I wish I was married to him. I might be more useful to him in Africa than here, just now."

"Why are you anxious?" said Fred cheerlessly.

"Because—oh, because I hear a good deal about South Africa and millionaires. People are really awfully kind, and every one who has nothing better to do drops in to see a friend on the Stock Exchange, and brings you all the news. They appear to know a great deal of Jerry's doings on the Stock Exchange, and to be all wondering what he'll do next. Qualifying for a millionaire seems uncommonly like learning to dance on the tight rope, and it seems to me that Jerry begins to dance before he quite knows the steps or the tricks of the trade. I shouldn't be surprised if he got so excited one day that he fell. It wouldn't so particularly matter if I were there: I could break the fall."

"It might break you."

"Oh, I shouldn't be broken. I'd be too anxious to find out what went wrong and to begin again. You see, I want Jerry to get over all that part young, so as to start on the big

things before he has to go for cures. Think of Jerry, fat and bald, running after a cure in a silk hat! I simply can't think of it!"

"What do you call big things, Jill?" inquired Fred nervously.

"The only big thing left for Jerry would, I suppose," she said sublimely, with a little sigh, "be politics."

"Oh, Jill, you have such a spacious outlook!" said Fred, with wistful admiration. "It's fine in a girl."

"It's finer in a man. A man can *do* the things while a girl only *thinks* them."

He sighed with genuine satisfaction.

"It's awfully nice to hear a girl allow that."

"It's not so much to allow, after all," said she. "It's far more agreeable to be the cause than the effect. Lots of people, I dare say, would prefer to be the general standing on the hill directing everything than just a captain down in the scrimmage carrying out the directions. There's something rather low in wading in blood and carnage and smoke and things."

"Oh!" said Fred. "I see."

"Fred, Jerry would be a first-lieutenant by this time," she said abruptly, out of the pause.

"Do you keep thinking of that still, Jill?"

"How can I help thinking of it? Not being able to mention the subject to Grandmother Devereux makes it worse, I think." In a spasm of grateful affection she seized Fred's arm and squeezed it. "Fred," she murmured, "you're a great comfort."

CHAPTER XV

MEANWHILE Jerry in Africa had also arrived at a crisis in his triumphant existence, and was steadying down to grapple with it. It had been a mad and magnificent gallop towards wealth, and to pull up within very sight of the winning post called for a firm hand.

But the getting of gold teaches discretion, and the fact that

honour was concerned in the sudden halt softened the shock of it for Jerry. Of late he had been clinging rather pathetically to the nobler emotions of life. The fever of ideals was running in his blood side by side with that of gold, to the dire confusion of both. Jerry was beginning to be doubtful where the one ended and the other began. These confusions were now being increased by a sudden little cloud of new ones.

* * * * *

The man more concerned than any other in the transactions that, now grown colossal, had got perhaps somewhat out of hand—out, at any rate, of Jerry's hand—had only one landmark, so to speak, to distinguish his unobtrusive and shadowy personality—a pair of eyes, apparently dead, with a habit of quickening in jerks at unexpected moment, a feat always accompanied by convulsive twitchings upon the part of the lengthy limbs of Mr. Jabez Simkins.

It was on the occasion of one of these odd stirrings of life that Jerry had been fetched up to his final full-stop. The mocking challenge shot out at him in the form of green light with an incredible life in it, from two great holes in a dead face in the very crisis of a committee meeting snapped sharp off Jerry's flow of convincing logic, whereupon, in a meek voice with shy roving eyes, Jabez refused in a general sort of way to make any furthur advances. But if meek, the voice was audible, while an inaudible and still more appalling resolve shone as clear as a lamp in the miraculously awakened countenance of Jabez. Not only would he refuse further advances, but, if needs must, would foreclose and without winking an eye-lid swamp the show. Jerry read it all in that one weird moment of illumination. What the motives of Jabez were he was at a loss to conjecture. But there was the fact, stark and naked before him.

Jerry could not discuss the thing there in the face of that vast throng of glaring countenances, rendered suspicious by the prevailing atmosphere of mine. His sudden piercing glance into the soul of Jabez had whisked the sense of

leadership out of his hands, and unless Jerry could lead, he invariably floundered. A whole vulpine board was aware of the flounder, and forthwith it lost confidence.

This was the beginning of the great fall in Bulayos, the cause likewise of its incomprehensible duration—a duration which so poignantly interested the Stock Exchange in Jerry's affairs, sent Fred upon dull and pregnant jaunts into the City, and provided Jill's obliging young friends with much vaguely technical information.

But Jabez Simkins, with unruffled calm, asked Jerry the very same evening to dinner, and after dinner his daughter, in a new frock, played artless tunes upon her mandolin, in a humble effort to exorcise the evil spirit that seemed somehow to have gotten hold of Mr. Devereux. For believing that because of her extreme youth and shy respectful ways, Nell would never remark his untimely dejection, Jerry made no effort to conceal it, but in his kind way, having given the little girl a box of chocolates and made some inquiries as to her innocent pastimes, he sat on the verandah beside her and brooded dumbly out into the night.

When, with a great flourish of silver and glass, the decanters were at last brought in, Jabez reappeared thirstily, his eyes sunken back in their grooves, from behind a cluster of blue plumbago bushes, from whence, with an amazingly alive grin, he had been watching the pair. Upon his appearance, in honour of the nightly refreshment, Nell tweaked out a horrid little travesty of some ballad connected with drink from her abominable instrument.

Having with his usual moribund immovability suffered this periodical sacrifice to the higher education, Jabez jerked himself back into life and ordered Nell off to bed.

"An' now, my boy, fill up," said he, with simple hospitality, "an' we'll yarn a bit."

Jerry roused himself to fill his glass, and watch with a faint, detached interest Jabez wriggling towards coherence.

Having, after his usual fashion, felt about after some irrelevant threads and dropped them one after the other with a

sort of helpless, patient, dissatisfied disdain, Jabez caught hold gingerly of Nell's mandolin and diffidently fell to examining it.

"Queer, ain't it, the little things as please 'em," said Jabez at last in the oblique, furtive voice he reserved for social functions. "The same way with the mother—eddicated, she was, to the nines—been governessing since eighteen in the best families. Wonderful style, pore Lizzy, always a-hankerin' after London; but there was always *me* in the background. I kep' the wrong side of that there Griffin, an' pore thing, she died alongin' for the right side. Pore Lizzy!" said Jabez, with a reminiscent chuckle.

Jerry roused himself further to catch the drift of this unheard-of discourse. He called to mind vaguely the quavering nebulous wisp of sandy vulgarity that used to lie on a sofa, tyrannise with infinite gentility over Jabez, and, in her efforts after refinement, starve her pretty, chubby little daughter into a horrifying slimness—the only sign of maternal solicitude ever apparent in that tissue-paper woman. He thought of the stories he had heard of her jealousies in regard to those other women attached to certain great mine-owners born to such distinction, who from time to time sailed swan-like into the presence of her Gracious Majesty; likewise of the buxom Jewesses uplifted upon piles of good gold to the same proud elevation who pranced in their wake before the august lady. But since Jerry looked upon Jabez as the most substantial brick in his sublime building scheme, he had always been tolerant to the eccentricities of Jabez's womankind. Being Jerry, moreover, he could not fail to be kind to them, without a thought of his own interest or of their uncouthness. Moreover, the loneliness of the little girl, together with the veil of wistfulness about her little face, had from the beginning touched Jerry, and perhaps moved him to a more solicitous interest in the poor little creature than he was quite aware of. But to bring in Nell and her poor tinsel mother now, with a mine crisis in the air, appeared to Jerry little short of acute mania. He stared anxiously at Jabez. It was not the first

time that a cool million had proved too much for the reason of an ignorant man.

Jabez's fingers were still twitching spasmodically at the metal strings of the mandolin; he was studiously avoiding Jerry's eyes.

Again Jerry wondered at the man. But he had a gentle, considerate way with his bricks, and never either hurried or harried them. He poured out a little more of Mr. Simkins's excellent whiskey, and brought his mind courteously to bear upon the matters that seemed for the moment to be absorbing that honest gentleman.

"I rather wonder, Jabez, that you don't send Nell to a good school for a year or so, you know."

For sole reply Jabez grunted apologetically behind his hand.

"The craze for education seems to be spreading even into the best families," pursued Jerry, with a kindly concession to his host's prejudices.

"Dessay," said Jabez mildly. "If the best families can't give her anythink else, 'twould be too bad if they couldn't give the pore thing some eddication."

"Quite so. And you see it makes education fashionable, more or less."

"Nell'll know enough, you bet, for a girl with a million."

The attitude of Jabez was certainly singular.

"Still," said Jerry soothingly, "you'll allow——"

"Mrs. Hepburn Carey'll present Nell—for a consideration. I've seen to it all. As for eddication, masters'll be Nell's figger—if she wants 'em. An', anyway, if her husband can't finish Nell after the way she's begun, why, he must be a darnder ass than I took him for, that's all!"

Jerry lighted a fresh cigar reflectively.

"The old chap has some one in his eye, then. This may be awkward; he may want to realise for the flare-out he'll think necessary."

"Seems like a hitch in the mine, Devereux," said Jabez, changing the conversation with a bang, and planking down the

mandolin with an alert vigour oddly at variance with his former diffident supine handling of it.

Jerry was startled, but he kept his head.

"It's a sort of thing that will happen," he admitted, with languid cheerfulness. "All it wants is handling, and a little time."

"Time ain't in it, and handling—there's been a darn sight too much handling already in this here business, Mr. Fitzgerald Devereux."

Jerry narrowed his eyes to look at Jabez. It struck him that Mr. Simkins must have been drinking.

"You don't get me there, Master Jerry, not me," said Jabez, nodding at the decanters facetiously. "I'm as dry as sawdust."

"In that case, Jabez, perhaps you'll explain. You're getting too subtle for me," said Jerry good-humouredly, leaning back in his long chair.

"Oh, if it's explaining you want, I'll explain all right, You're in the devil of a hole, an' it'll take some explaining to get you out of it."

"We've tided over worse than this," said Jerry, after a pause, in which, in spite of himself, he felt a little choked and husky. Jabez's attitude, there was no denying it, would also call for some tiding over.

"Oh, have you? It was before I came on the board, then."

"You're forgetting the November meeting. We were pretty hard pushed then."

"Not you! With me behind you."

"We still enjoy that inestimable advantage."

Jerry's laugh was, if anything, too jaunty.

Jabez looked at him smilelessly, and his eyes sank back slowly into their great caverns.

"Depends!" said Jabez.

Suddenly he laid hands again upon the mandolin, and jerked discords out of its groaning bowels.

Jerry stood up and stretched frankly.

"Jabez, it's late. Do, like a good fellow, get to the point."

"There's a sight o' points to get to, seems to me. There's

them mines," he said absently, pecking squeaks from the instrument, "there's the mortgage an' the capital—an'——" He paused and veered off suddenly upon another tack. "There's a waste of eddication an' talent in this whole bloomin' business. We want a Power House, like, in London; in the West End—and the right man to run the show. With his head screwed on—well, say fairly straight," said Jabez thoughtfully, jabbing at a string, "But his address and general flummery must be A1, an' he must be in, you know, with the right sort; must have family, you twig, an' the right cut o' coat. An' he'll want a wife accordin'."

"Yes."

As Jerry stared blankly in his face, the dead eyes emitted a transient, tremulous, but undeniable wink.

"He must have a wife," repeated Jabez, "to make the thing go. It wants handling, as you said, Mr. Fitzgerald D.; but it's different handling from what it's had up to now. D'ye twig?"

"I can't say that I do," said Jerry, with a trace of haughtiness. Jabez seemed to be going a little too far.

Jabez covered all the room beyond Jerry in a long patient glance.

"Do tell now! You're a bit off colour, Mr. Fitzgerald. An' upon my word, I don't wonder. It was a facer, sure enough."

Jerry's irritation here broke bounds.

"For God's sake, Jabez, stop twanging that confounded fiddle, and get out what you've got to say. The mine's all right. There's every man's money in it, and you know it, else yours wouldn't be there."

"Oh, I know a sight! I know, for one thing, that you'll not get a dollar on the mine this minute in any market in this here globe."

"They don't know the mine, that's all, and you do."

"A man can shut his teeth on his knowledge if he has a mind to."

"No man in his senses will cut off his nose to spoil his face."

"That depends. No man but yourself and a few of the shareholders you may have chanced to rake in would be fools enough to put all their eggs in one basket."

"What's the use of all this, Jabez? Our interests are identical."

"That, I repeat, remains to be proved."

"I should have thought it was proved already—pretty well proved."

"Don't do to be cocksure of anything in South Africa! It was a pleasure to see you drive the teams. You have a way with the ribbons, you toffs! But the pore devil on the back seat has his feelings likewise, even if he does make way for his betters in the matter of driving." Jabez fell suddenly back into deprecation. "He likes to know the road he's going."

"Good heavens, man! The road's clear enough."

"Dear, dear, yes! It's as clear as any one could wish so long as I'm on the back seat."

"Do you propose to leave it?"

"That depends. Sit down, Devereux," said he, with a strange, crackling laugh. "If your breeding won't keep a cool head on you, I'm hanged if your brains will. Can't you see——"

"No, I can't——"

"Well, then, I'll tell you——"

Jerry sprang up furiously.

"Enough of this, Jabez——"

"Gently, Mr. Devereux, gently! I think I have a right to be heard. Sit down, my friend, I won't keep you long. It was my mistake. I thought you and the likes of you had a fancy for suggestion an' flat-footed facts were low-class. You've known us now a matter of three years and bin pretty friendly with my Nell during that period."

"Well, what of that?"

"You'll have noticed, maybe, that excep' for you, I keep Nell to herself, an' her ma was equally select likewise?"

"Certainly. I have always thought you extremely sensible in the matter."

Jabez chuckled.

"Naturally. Still, that sort of an arrangement may carry consequences to the weaker party."

Jabez looked at the wall slowly.

"Well!"

"Well, it seems to me that Nell is sweet on you."

Jerry lifted himself to his feet.

"May I ask how ——

"You're asking how I know. See," said Jabez, with a voice of extraordinary meekness and an oblique glance. "Well, you see the girl being off her feed, and at loose ends generally, I sort of suspected the gnawing worm, you know, and such-like antics, so I made bold to listen at her door."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Not being a gentleman, you see, I could presume on my intimacy with an innocent child."

"Is that an accusation?"

"You can take it or leave it. It's gettin' late, anyhow, an' business is business. If I leave the board, you go crash, every man Jack of you. If you choose to marry Nell—you know she's as pure a nugget as you'll be likely to get. It's no take-in, I'm d——d if it is. Stop!"

Jabez lifted his hand in cool command, and probably for the first time in his sordid life he looked a man, every inch of him.

"Stop, and let me have my say out. Nell's a flower, and, if you marry her, she'll win you. You'll be proud of her. You don't know Nell. You don't know what's in that girl. No one don't know but me." The indeterminate shifty voice swelled out boldly into honesty, the man's eyes grew human and kind; his grotesque person lifted itself into an astonishing dignity of bearing. "An' there ain't naught pinch-beck about my girl, nor yet brand-new, nor one darnd dash of gilt. She's true goods to the core, an' obedience is in the marrow of her bones. She'll be as big as the man she loves has a fancy for her to be, an' as small. She'll stand up to a queen, God bless her, but if her man was to fall on bad times,

she'd smile every bit as sweet and black his boots for him. She's a daisy, is Nell, of the stuff of them dead an' buried lydies who respected theirselves an' honoured their husbands."

"She's the best little girl in the world," said Jerry, with genuine feeling. "But the fact is, Jabez, I'm engaged already."

Jabez hitched himself back into his habitual grotesqueness.

"Do you take me for a luny, Mr. Devereux? Do you think I haven't made myself acquainted with that fact? Do you s'pose I've waited to hear it from yourself?"

"We're not in the habit of blabbing out all our concerns," said Jerry stiffly.

"And we," said Jabez, "ain't above safeguarding a girl from herself."

Jerry flushed.

"It's only a conceited ass who'd think the precaution necessary."

"I'm a fair man, Mr. Devereux," whined Jabez, dropping his truculence like a hot coal. "An' that looks like an argument. Anyway, the mischief's done, an' I have to think of my Nell. The other lady, from all I hear, is sparkin' round light an' airy enough for a gell with a young man——"

"Leave the other lady out, if you please."

"Oh, certainly an' it's late. I'll make you a fair offer," said Jabez, wriggling up out of his chair. "I'll give you Nell an' an establishment—that's the jargon, ain't it?—an' I'll stay here on the spot an' try a hand at the ribbons——"

"I'm much obliged to you, Jabez; but as things stand——"

"Not much standing in South Africa. We progress here—push on. Soft now, and let me finish. I ain't an elegant whip, maybe; still, I know the road—an' the hosses——"

"I told you just now, I think, that I am already engaged. There is such a thing as honour."

"So there is. A power of it is shut up in a hundred thousand pounds of the hard earnings of the British public."

"The mine is as sound as a bell," said Jerry, in a sharp voice.

"'Tain't sound enough, anyway, to soothe the feelings of the public, an' help your credit with 'em when I bust it up."

"This, then, is a definite threat."

"No, it ain't; it's a definite offer. An' now listen to reason, do. Jabez Simkins never caught a chap sharp up, and I'm d——d if he's a-goin' to begin now. I'll give you till next May to decide. That's fair and square enough."

"One can do a lot in six months," thought Jerry, with a catch of his breath.

Jabez smiled square in his face.

"Two can play at that game, my boy," he murmured.

Jerry's brows sprang together. He felt an indecency in having his brain bared to this preposterous ferret-man.

"Good-night, Jabez."

"Good-night, my boy. I'll not go back on my word. The shares have bin giving sleepless nights to many a lone widder this many a week. I'll ease the pore thing's heart, an' give you till August. An' the human heart, my dear lad, it's as open to treatment as a hoss's mouth."

When Jerry got to his room, he staggered into a chair.

"Jabez!" he muttered, "Jabez, the reptile! He to turn rusty! and that poor little goose of a baby, to have her flung wholesale into the infernal business. It's intolerable!"

Whenever he graced the glittering board of Jabez, Jerry preserved all the rigour of civilisation intact, and the unyielding satin spread of his shirt hemmed him in like a brass breast-plate.

He shouted to his boy to go to bed, and gasping, tore off his clothes.

The whiskey was on the table; he sat down beside it, and his thoughts flew off to Jill. Jill in the sheer nature of things heralded in every undertaking. She was an odd little dash of prayer before every battle; the thanksgiving after every victory. And whenever Jerry thought of her he was a boy again, his face bright with courage. But he had to put her aside at last with regretful longing and get to business.

The concerns with which Jerry was associated were always

honest concerns, all well worth the money and the confidence of the public. This was indeed proved sufficiently by the fact that he had himself put into them every penny of his available capital. At the same time they were perhaps not sufficiently blatantly, vulgarly honest to warrant his going to the public for elucidation upon any knotty point in regard to them, and certainly not at this present juncture for any further advances. Owing to causes all unavoidable, they had been obliged to give this long-suffering body, the public, already an unpleasant shock or so. Just now to call in more capital would simply spell ruin.

The mine was sound; at this point, Jerry sighed with satisfied conscience. There was gold there—for the getting. It had to be got, that was all, and without further encroachment upon a perverse generation that indeed had suffered Faith gladly for a considerable period and now clamoured boorishly for Sight. There are reservations in any trade, however honest, not capable of explanation to a carping and stiff-necked public.

But in his own mind, Jerry was really quite touchingly sure of the inherent rectitude permeating even the most intricate winding of all his undertakings. He took care in fact to make himself sure, and when in conferring with Jabez, had invariably exhausted himself in arguments before fairly embarking upon what had haply struck his vigilant sensitiveness at first sight as a questionable innovation.

Certainly, as he now went carefully through the past, he found that in every case he did seem in the end to have given in to Jabez. But upon further investigations he found that he had invariably been quite right in so doing. There was no intolerant pride about Jerry, and after all, Jabez had had a sound commercial education; a close study of sordid but necessary detail was bred in the very bone of the man. He was eminently a useful instrument. And to make reasonable use of efficient tools was after all precisely what Jerry alone professed to do. He claimed no royal road to success.

After a long musing Jerry was able honestly to cast no more

than a flickering doubt upon his own absolute integrity of motive. And even this, after a moment's rational handling, faded off into the obscurity it deserved. What clung and remained was that Jabez seemed to have twisted and screwed himself in an entirely unaccountable way into every undertaking. There was no bilking the fact that the influence of Jabez had spread with phenomenal rapidity. For months past he seemed, with unwavering deference and civility, to have been advancing paltry sums, which, when Jerry now totted them up, appeared to have swollen prodigiously. Jabez, in short, was indispensable to the further existence of the company.

After one exultant throb at having himself been the discoverer of Jabez, Jerry's soaring spirit fell to consider Nell. He flushed like a boy when he brought her on the carpet, and he had to draw his breath hard and have a little more whiskey before he could enter categorically upon so extremely delicate a subject. Jerry was very fond of the little girl. He had frequently congratulated himself modestly upon the hand he had taken in the upbringing of the poor little thing. He was always glad that, even in the sweltering rush of South Africa, he had been instrumental in preserving some of her childhood intact for poor Nell. But for him that impossible mother of hers must have cast her, full two years ago, into the gaudy swirl of a mining society. And, if through the working of the hereditary curse within her she did play tunes on the mandolin, she played them out of a pure heart, with a gentle desire to please, and a most artless and engaging deference for any criticism he had the heart to apply to the painful performance.

Nell was sweet and simple absolutely, and of a convolvulus-like prettiness. She disarmed criticism. And no man living but must think tenderly of a young girl who, to his own exceeding spiritual embarrassment, whatever it might be to his material advancement, had thought fit to bestow her secret and sacred affections upon himself. Jerry felt his position of involuntary eavesdropping keenly, and it was a dastardly insult to the girl to have converted her into the pivot of what was no

more nor less than a "plant." Jerry flushed hot with shame to have been even the guiltless accomplice of such a scheme. It was not a situation to reach clearly all at once. When he turned it about shyly it was too absolutely incredible. He could only feel a strange grave amused pity for Nell. But as he stumbled on of a sudden he found himself projected into the remarkable ramifications of the unsolicited blessing poured upon him, whereupon he no longer smiled, even grimly; and the intellectual capacity of Jabez seemed to expand in bounds before his blinking eyes. When the hideous, masterly, oblique villainy bred of the parental affection of this gifted man burst in its full significance upon Jerry, he sprang from his seat and fairly raged round like a trapped beast. When he got into bed at last the red was in the east, and poor Jerry's stout and merry heart hung like a stone in his shivering body.

CHAPTER XVI

HOPE sprang up with the dawn, and Jerry fell asleep at last smiling hazily over some memory of Jill.

When he got up about noon he was full of fresh life, and Jabez back again blinking amongst the shadows.

When he had breakfasted he sat down to write to Jill, and the words, refusing to foreshadow disaster, ran joyfully off his pen into life and laughter. But before he had got to the second sheet a little note with a big monogram came in from Nell, asking him to help her in organising a picnic. This was nothing. He had helped her already with a hundred. Nell was a creature foredoomed by Providence to the willing help of man. It had become one of Jerry's duties to be an instrument in the fulfillment of her destiny. The office, monopolised by him, kept the poor little thing from undesirable associates, and broke the monotony of the burning hours. It was even mildly amusing to compare Nell with Jill.

But now, as he fingered the artless, trust-breathing composition, a distressing wave of compassion for the helpless

victim of two men's solicitude flooded him hotly, and with most discomposing and sudden distinctness he could feel the grind of Jabez's heel upon his neck. Joy vanished in a streak, but courage mounted.

With the note still in his hand, Jerry went to the door.

"Tell Miss Simkins," said he to the Kaffir boy, "that I'm coming round this afternoon, therefore I won't write."

He tossed Nell's note into the waste-paper basket, and thrust his half-written letter to Jill into a drawer, locked it with an irritated click, and bounced down to the office.

Mr. Simkins was already well on his way to the town. Two members of the board hovered with subdued agitation between the office and the nearest "pub." Three telegrams, all throbbing with nervous excitement, hung waiting in the tapes.

All, men and missives, had to receive Jerry's careful attention. It was six o'clock before he could get away. And Nell, rosy with hope, had been watching for him on the verandah from behind the great Grenadilla vine for two breathless hours.

But this much must be said for Miss Simkins: in her emotion she had in no sort of way forgotten her duty. The tea was exquisite, and in case Mr. Devereux was too hot even for tea, iced coffee stood on its own especial silver stand. Also, because he liked the delectable mixture at any hour, directly Jerry appeared a grinning boy peeped through the curtained door, plunged back into the gloom, and emerged with tall glasses of passion-fruit mixed cunningly with white constantia and cream, all iced to perfection.

From her babyhood Nell had associated man with Business, Thirst, and a Great Mind, which, whilst working, must under no circumstances be interrupted; whilst resting, must, however, be stayed with liquid nourishment. Thus, when, with an exquisite finish and completeness, she had ministered to all Jerry's wants, following her invariable custom Nell sat down with crossed hands to await his pleasure.

Nell was a born handmaid; a monument of every exploded virtue. Her life was one long and sweet surprise.

Having, therefore, neither experience nor any hankering after it, her presence in a Torrid Zone was a peculiarly soothing one. So soothing, indeed, did it prove to Jerry that he had swallowed three glasses of passion-fruit and two cups of coffee before he quite realised that to lounge on a verandah was not precisely what he had come to do. He pushed away his empty vessels with a gesture as though he had dallied too long, and stood up looking down at Nell. Nell, as a matter of course, looked up at him. To her amazement she beheld, regarding her fixedly, a god stern with purpose. Whereupon the poor little thing blushed to her eyes. Jerry, descrying the avenging colour, and being more man than god, flushed also, till the little white strip of forehead, which had escaped the weather was now of a redder brick than all the sun-baked rest of his face, and for a few intolerable seconds the two young creatures faced each other stricken dumb with fear of a widely differing origin.

Jerry stepped from the confounding flame of her blushes and looked out through a breach in the mesh of purple-green fruit, over the wide sun-smitten veldt. A sudden breeze tossed a branch of starry blossom that had remained sheltered from the ripening sun against his shoulder. The eagerness with which his hand darted out to seize it and tear the glistening, purple-decked white leaves to pieces brought him stark to the fact. He could have shaken Jabez over a precipice as he might a reptile, but his heart melted towards Jabez's little daughter.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you for a long time, Nell," he said, looking fixedly at his mutilated passion-flower, "but you always strike me—you know—well, as little more than a child."

Nell murmured a choked little "Oh!" and her eyes shone like an angel's upon Jerry's back.

"I didn't like to bother you." She looked meek reproach. Jerry had now shifted and could see her through the tail of his eye. "The precocity of young South Africa, its scurry to bang about in anything it can lay hold on,

is so entirely abominable," he said valiantly. "Your innocent childlike outlook was always such a delightful contrast—as refreshing as an English breeze! That's why I didn't like to break in on it, to disturb it with my own little story, which deals naturally—you know—in—in the things which concern adults. A man can't very well live to my age," he said apologetically, "without having a story."

Nell was perplexed. She held her breath to prepare for anything, to protect herself. Her hands involuntarily pressed quietly up against her heart.

"They come to us all, these stories." Jerry paused, and laughed oddly. "She's extremely difficult to describe——"

"She?"

He did not hear her. Jill had thrust Nell into the outer darkness.

"She's not the least like any one else."

Jerry's eyes were shining. Nell looked slowly at his face, and despair swooped down into her heart and set its claws upon its beating. But it went on again soon, and in the minute Nell had grown wise. She paused just long enough to swallow her first bitter morsel of the truth decently, for Nell had seemly instincts. Then she said gently, but with the first note of command Jerry had ever heard in her biddable voice:

"Tell me her name."

This brought him round upon her.

"Her name? Oh, her name is Jill Devereux. She's a distant cousin."

Sorrow and wonder seemed to be striking roots ruthlessly into Nell's wincing heart. Her eyes were dry, but she was on the edge of a lake of tears. The only thing that could keep her from falling in and disgracing herself was to talk—to talk of this Jill.

"Jill—Jill," she repeated, her eyes wide, vacant, unfixed. "But her real name?"

Jerry was looking at the broken flower.

"Gillian. She used to call herself Jill, so we all fell into the way. We always, all of us, fell into Jill's ways."

"Who are—all?" she asked in a slow, dull voice. "You've never told me anything."

"Because—it was all Jill, so—if——"

"If you had to leave Jill out! Oh, but—I wish you had—I wish you hadn't left Jill out," she said vaguely.

He looked at her for the first time.

"So do I. It was about the most idiotic thing I've ever done to leave Jill out. I know now that you're the one girl in the whole world with whom I'd care—in a sort of way, you know—to share Jill."

"It's not too late now," said Nell, after one little sharp pause.

"No" said Jerry, in a queer hollow voice, "no, I suppose it's not. You—you happen to be an angel, you see."

"I thought—I thought men hated angels."

"If they're like you, they worship them," said Jerry in a low voice.

"Ah!" she said. It sounded like a little sob.

She was wise enough by this time to know that the rare and lofty airs of worship do most piteously chill the blood. She shivered softly and silently.

"And you love Jill?"

"I love her," said Jerry, looking away. "She's the best part of me; I can't get things right without Jill. Anything without Jill in it invariably goes wrong."

He waited nervously, but no comment came. He pushed on desperately:

"And, Nell, the odd thing is, that we both, Jill and I, know this in an extraordinary clear sort of way. The first big crash—when I had to leave the Navy—all came through forgetting Jill. My silly head was turned just then with—several frothy sort of things"—Jerry spoke gently; he remembered there had been a girl amongst them—"and in considering feelings, I forgot duty and got chucked. I've never lost touch with Jill yet, but I've slackened."

"Oh!" said Nell, suddenly holding her hands tighter than ever against her bursting heart. "That's real love."

"It is," said Jerry, with a bowed head, and his voice broke a little. "It's the right sort, I think. It ought to have taught me better about—a lot of things."

"I think it's taught you very well—I think it's taught you very well," repeated Nell, in a dreary little shaken voice. "Jill—Jill isn't an angel?" she said, after a pause. She had steadied her voice and fixed her sorrowful blue eyes upon his face.

"Jill? Well no—good heavens, no!"

"And you don't worship her? But of course you don't," she said, answering herself. "It would—it would be like worshipping yourself. You—you understand her too well for that," she said, with naïve philosophy. "Oh, it's fine! I could never love wisely like that, and—be an influence. I could only just—love and believe."

"That's a beautiful way of loving," said Jerry, stifling a groan. "The worst of it is so few of us are worth that sort of love."

"One doesn't think of the worth, somehow. I wonder—I wonder if Jill would like me," she said wistfully.

"Jill adores truth. She'd like you the minute she saw you. And when she had circled round you a little, to find out things—it's Jill's way—she'd love and honour you just in the same way I do."

"Ah, some day perhaps we'll see. I hear the horses—it's my father. Mr. Devereux, you aren't going to stay to dinner?"

Her voice broke upon a low dull note of irrepressible agony.

"My dear! my dear! Of course I'm not," he groaned.

When her father sidled on to the verandah, Nell was peeping into the tea-pot.

"It's quite cold," she said, smiling up at him. "You'll have to wait a minute."

Jabez in his shy, retiring way was very genial. He was fairly wounded when Jerry refused to stay and partake of

pot luck at his humble board. Jabez loved to be taken unawares. He found an ever fresh felicity in showing to so old a friend as Jerry even that never under any circumstances did he falter or fail in his gentility, but would always eat of the best, in his tail-coat, from off silver plate.

This devastating rigidity of principle in a Torrid Zone was a point of honour with honest Jabez, and the root of untold anguish to all his friends.

"I can't, really, to-night," Jerry repeated, for the fifth time. "But when you've had your tea, you might walk down to the cross-roads with me."

Jabez glanced furtively at Nell, grunted and coughed behind a limp hand, and faltered into meek geniality. His remarks were directed with remorseless precision upon the coming picnic, the arrangements for which, he assumed suavely, had been occupying the undivided attention of his quailing victims. The gimlet-like insistence of Jabez and his deliberate sipping of his tea amounted, in Jerry's estimation, to positive insolence. It was all he could do to hold his tongue and contain his wrath.

Nell made suitable little replies, and slowly, slowly grew white. When at last Jabez had grown tired of his amiable diversion, and they rose to go, Jerry's eyes shot out gratitude, but Nell failed to catch even this cold comfort, for though her eyes were tearless, they were blurred with pain.

Jabez gave his young friend no time for any ebullition of righteous wrath.

"The longer I live," he began mildly, before they were off the verandah, "the less I understand the honour of the English aristocrat. I doubt it goes too deep and lifts too high a head for the like of me. It needs an eddication. To think now of you havin' it out with my little Nell like that. Dear, dear! Happen to mention, did you now, that you're aware of that there innocent attachment of hern and our little arrangement?"

"Do you take me for a cad?"

"Would I propose to marry my only child to a cad? I

take you for what you are—an honourable gentleman, with a name behind him. A name," said Jabez mincingly, "carries a big responsibility. It must be kep' clean at all costs."

"I'm quite equal to the charge of my own name," said Jerry.

"Well, yes, perhaps. Meanwhile, we have to think of the mine. Between the fools round about here an' the others across the water, I've had a bit of bother to-day. We'll have a troublesome year, I doubt."

"What's precisely your game?" said Jerry, with amazing self-control.

"Play 'em on a hook," said Jabez, with his simplest smile.

"Honest, that, and rational!"

"It's telling!" said Jabez. "We're in the know. The rest don't count. We can laugh at 'em and their hysterics till we bust."

"Yes. That strikes one as high-minded, not to say high-handed treatment, don't you think, Jabez?"

"I'm a plain man, sir," said Jabez, bridling, "an' don't go much on hints. The mine's honest to the bed-rock, for all I know. Perhaps you may have private information."

Jerry's look quelled him.

"Soft now, soft!" he wheedled. "So far, *we're* the mine, you and I, and we're a house founded on a rock, my boy," he added facetiously. "Nothing shoddy in an inch of our foundation. We can defy the world, and what's more, South Africa, if it comes to close inquiry. Lor', Mr. Fitzgerald Devereux, can't you see the frolic in a surface caper or so on a rock of gold, sir? There's millions in that there mine, sir, millions!—Stars an' comets! when I think of Nell!—however things go," he added, in an oily gurgle. "Meanwhile you have a free hand, Devereux, an' no falling off in friendship. Realise—if you can," he murmured, "or nip round an' fake up fresh mortgages, an' oust me. I can't say no fairer, now can I?"

The devilish ingenuity—that was becoming only too apparent in the construction of the trap in which he found himself

writhing put Jerry on his mettle; his inborn pride held him erect and dumb. Words, he saw, were but feeble barricades against low malignity and a Machiavel-cum-Clapham mind. In any case, Jerry by this time knew better than to "bluff" a South African.

"We've had enough of this for one day, Jabez, haven't we?" said Jerry, with good-humoured contempt, pausing to light his pipe.

When Jerry chose to come the gentleman over him, as he humbly put it, the heart of Jabez melted like wax. The one unutterable secret of his grinding life seemed to be laid bare before a scoffing world. By the decree of a ruthless Providence, Jabez had begun life as a tailor. When stabbed back into his ignoble past, Jabez invariably returned to gentility soaked in old habits. He now turned the inexorable measuring gaze of a tailor upon the unbending length of the limbs of that lion he held tight in his trap, a lion which openly flouted every atom of the mouse that had got the better of him.

Jerry knew nothing of the origin of Simkins, and cared less, but the fatal gaze of the tailor informed him that for the moment Jabez was worsted. He nodded a pleasant good-night and stalked off, buttressed up once more by the unobtrusive but soul-sustaining habit of egoism so peculiarly his own.

Jabez fished a cruel, low, and unsavoury oath out of his lowly memories, and snarled it out at Jerry's incomparable back—made for a stylish cut. The next minute he grinned in deprecation of such paltry temper, with his every scheme humming.

"Lor' bless us! What does it matter?" he murmured. "I have him and his mortgages as tight as wax. The darndest fool in South Africa wouldn't touch 'em with a long pole. An' with a cool million in that mine! He'll be ready to tear his heart out about the other gell, an' honour—save us and bless us—honour! But Nell'll have what she hankers arter in the end, by hook or by crook—trust old J.

for that—an' they'll pull it off in the end like other folks, no doubt. We weren't good enough, not us! to be told of that there Irish pauper hussy! It was a bad day for you, Master Jerry Devereux, when you put that slight on me an' mine, an you'll repent it in the gutter, unless you play fair, and do the right thing by Nell—an infernal deal too good, too, for a chap with a kink in him."

Jabez slunk back to his gilded halls, devoured, with striking humility, an immense dinner, and in spite of it wrote three letters, which, although they failed to appear in the mine's records, dominated for a good three months the fortunes of its groaning shareholders.

Meanwhile Jerry, with unabated courage, wrote merry letters to Jill, when he had far better have told her the honest truth, and, with the tenacious energy of a bull-dog, assailed every means whereby he might snap so much as one mesh of the net which Jabez, in such simple faith, had woven about him. Jerry refused to be beaten. He thrust his fist boldly into the very face of truth. But truth will stand aside for no man. It refused to budge. It was then that Jerry first slackened and went a little to the off-side of truth.

Nell had already got into the warp and woof of his letters, and being so simple and sweet, so utterly unlike Jill, and his own part in her so sincere and honest, his presentment of her was plain enough, and caused Jill, upon that score, not a tittle of anxiety.

Already, however, the City reports, carried to her in weird fragments by her young friends, had brightened Jill's understanding, and the golden fog that seemed now to envelop all Jerry's financial schemes completed her enlightment. With her accustomed dreadful agility, Jill sprang to the truth.

This happened one breathless, hushed day just before Fred called after some days' absence. He had been in close attendance upon his great-uncle, sick of a quinsy, and according to his invariable custom preparing elaborately and in abject terror for that future after which, in rude health, he so ardently yearned.

Downcast himself and ripe for sympathy, the instant Fred saw Jill he knew that she knew all that was to be known in regard to Jerry—knew more, in fact, than in all probability Jerry himself was yet aware of—and that it all lay figured out in ruthless order in the girl's incisive mind. Fred's first perverse impulse was an abounding compassion for Jerry. Then he thought of himself, and his heart grew cold.

"Come out, Jill," he said hastily. "We'll go to the Park in a hansom, and sit down on penny chairs. It's too hot for anything else."

"We'll go on the top of an omnibus and paddle in the Serpentine."

"All right, but won't towels on our arms this hour of the day look like bounce?"

"Oh, well, perhaps. After all, there's not much originality in breaking laws and shocking; any one can do that. It's only when you can manage to break all you want to, and yet not turn the hair of an archbishop, that you score. That's the highest morality! I'll take a fan instead of a towel."

"Foolish speaking sometimes ends in active idiocy, Jill," said her grandmother. "So far you've been preserved from that."

Jill's cheeks were burning vividly, and her eyes glanced and danced irrepressibly, but they looked strained.

"Don't be long," said Fred.

"Fred!" said Mrs. Devereux, "have you heard any news of Jerry lately?"

"No—none direct," he added in the pause.

"Well, *she* has, or else she's come to some conclusion. It's true probably—and cruel."

There was an odd bond growing up between Grandmother Devereux and Fred. They had got so far now as to throw out vague rankling doubts in each other's teeth, and as they did so to search each the countenance of the other.

"She doesn't mean to be cruel."

"Probably not. Few women do, yet it's proverbially the cruel sex. Let us call it Jill's nature; it sounds more kind.

There are a number of undesirable qualities to be worked out of Jill before she settles down to a decent womanhood. I had hoped that she would perhaps get rid of them upon those amiable young impossibles who, wherever we appear, mob and stifle us. But I fear it's hopeless expecting any help from that quarter. It amuses Jill to fascinate the creatures. They adore her almost tearfully, and know as much about her as birds in their nests. I've done my duty, but you might as well preach to pea-pods. Jill can only concentrate herself seriously upon those she loves or fears. It is they who will suffer while she attains; God help them, say I. Jill must have the best of everything for every purpose; she can't even work out her own salvation upon harmless ambiguity. Unless," she added reflectively, a fraction of a glance flung upon Fred's grave countenance—"unless, indeed, she were fortunate enough both to love a man and to fear him, which is very far from being the case in the present instance. She has no fear of Jerry. She confines herself wholly to being afraid for him—an attitude hardly conducive to Jill's moral development—possibly not to Jerry's."

"Jerry could not do without Jill—now," Fred said slowly.

"Perhaps not, very likely not; but I have my doubts in the matter. And a man should be a man—not a hermit crab."

"What on earth are you talking about?" said Jill in the doorway.

"Social shell-fish," said Grandmother Devereux promptly, snapping her lips.

"Good gracious!" But before she was out on the landing Jill's thoughts had every one swung back to Jerry.

To Fred's infinite relief she left the previous subject unexplored.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN they paused in the little passage, dark at noontide, that Fred might finish buttoning one of her gloves, the twilight, as usual, got into Jill's head. She seized the unfortunate man's arm with both her hands and gave it an affectionate hug.

"If you hadn't come to-day," she said, "I'd have marched straight into that wheezy room and unearthed you. There's a hitch somewhere in Jerry's affairs. I know nothing definitely, except that there is."

"You want sun and air," said Fred stolidly. "Come out."

"Sun and air may exorcise the devil; they won't clear up Jerry's present muddle. That wants *me*."

"There's an omnibus, and the front seats are empty," said Fred desperately.

"You've heard of Nell?" she inquired, the instant they were safe on their perch.

"No."

"Now that shows just exactly how much she matters!" There was a little ring of triumph in Jill's voice. "I've known everything about her for years. While she was there I felt sure that Jerry would always keep his nails in perfect order and be preserved from clinking his tea-spoon and other temptations. I've often felt thankful for Nell. Now Jerry's begun to apologise for her."

Jill was sitting quite still, looking straight out before her. Fred knew the attitude and distrusted it. He sighed and glanced dejectedly at the heavens. They were lowering. The air seemed to be weighed down with thunder. No atmospheric conditions could be less promising for Jill's mood.

"Who is Nell?" he asked, quaking.

"She's the daughter of that Jabez person, whose eyes dart in and out like an apostle on a mechanical clock."

"I know," in his unpleasant honesty he hesitated slightly; "Jerry's right-hand man."

"I've had a feeling lately," said Jill, still looking ahead of her, her voice dropping to a whisper, "that the places are getting shuffled: that now Jerry is the right-hand man, and Jabez the gentleman who employs him. I don't know. I just feel it."

With Jill looking as she did, Fred always felt as though he were standing before some strange and dreadful Holy of Holies, behind one of the doors of which stood derision with a bleeding heart. Fred was hopeless where Jill was concerned. She sent his philosophy flying.

"Jabez has pots of money," he said presently, irrelevantly, but Jill thoroughly understood him.

"The fact is, Jerry can't get on without me," said she.

"But Jill——"

"Something's going to happen. I firmly believe it's Nell."

"Look here, Jill. Of course I've heard things. The shares are fluctuating in an amazing sort of a way——"

"Everything's as honest as the sun."

"And the shareholders are raging."

"People are extremely good-natured, and give me tons of information. That Jabez is a genius. He's getting honour on to Jerry's brain now. And unless I can save him, Nell will be the last knot in Jerry's noose, which, indeed, will also be Nell's," said Jill, with the emotionless directness peculiar to her.

"You're probably worrying yourself to death for no cause whatsoever."

"I should never, under any circumstances, worry myself to death, whatever I might do to other people. I never worry myself at all without ample cause. I tell you I know it. It's being a Devereux. I'm not responsible."

"Jerry will square himself right enough."

"Jerry's all right in theory, but you can't depend on him to hold tight on to himself in practice," said she, in her level voice. "He can't see that to hold tight on to

yourself is to keep every one else up. If you forget yourself, you're lost."

"Oh!" said Fred.

"It's all right," she assured him, "however it may sound. See what bothering about other people brought Jerry to the first time. Jerry must be far better or far worse before ever he'll be a great man alone. As things stand he must have me. Otherwise he'll fail—probably in an unpleasant sort of way. Fred, do you hear what I say?"

"Every word."

"You might be doing sums to look at you, or inventing a new proposition.—I ought to be there this minute."

"But, Jill, that's impossible."

"You never know what's impossible till you try. Marrying Nell will never make Jerry able to do without me, and if seeing him going to waste is to be the occupation of my leisure hours—things may happen, you know."

"Never, Jill, with you there."

"I believe you think I'm iron-plated, with ribs of steel." Her voice thrilled with sudden soft passion.

"I believe you're a gallant ship that will sail fair always."

"You're senseless with exploded beliefs, just as you always were."

"So far they haven't failed me."

"I don't know much about exploded beliefs myself. I know more about unexploded unbeliefs, but so far you've never failed me."

The omnibus lumbered up to the Park gates. They had to wait at the corner for the crowd to give way.

"I wonder——" Jill broke off, and looked at him.

"Yes?" he said nervously.

She threw up her hand with an odd little gesture and began to tell him anecdotes of her experiences and make illuminating remarks about hats, until they had chosen and taken possession of their chairs. While they were crossing the maze of carriages, making slow headway down the great brilliant crowd, the day changed its mind. Through a rift

in the sullen clouds the sun came forth. The air lightened, and the drowsiness in the women's faces and the colour in their clothes were lit to life again in the golden glow.

Jill reflected the light like a diamond. Her face glinted and glanced and flashed up again. In a minute her eyes were alive with elfish fire, her tongue nimble with mocking wit.

It was joy enough for Fred to sit and watch her—to watch at every turn the wistful elusive kindness to himself always present in her voice, present sometimes even in the most elfish of her glances. But when they were coming back together across the grass amidst the lengthening shadows, in spite of the glint of the lamps and the hum of a thousand feet there fell upon them the expectant hush of the evening.

Fred hurried towards the streets. He was possessed as usual by a haunting dread lest Jill might one day ask him for that he could perhaps not give her.

Perceiving his untoward haste, Jill dropped calmly down upon a green seat.

"I'm going to three dances to-night," she said softly, "and I don't care in the least for one of them. I wonder if I'm growing old or dull——"

Fred mumbled some clumsy protest.

"Or ugly. Cousin Lawrence says that I have really nothing much to recommend me. I have certainly no beauty, only an inexorable murmur of unfledged capacities, and that very likely if I'd been educated I might have specialised in one or other of them, acquired an intellectual brow and grown dull."

"Cousin Lawrence trying to be modern makes me sick."

"It's a sense of balance. He likes to bring his conversation into date with his clothes and his religion. He goes to confession now."

"Pah!" said Fred. "May I smoke?"

"Do!" said Jill, nose in air. "I can smell stale incense."

"Fred," she said presently, turning in her corner so that she could look straight in his face, her own rather white,

"you know, and I know, and Jerry knows, that Jerry can't get on without me, that if he hasn't me he'll fail, that we ought to be together, we two, to do any good at all. I know he wants me now—this minute. We haven't a penny among us, Grandmother Devereux, Cousin Lawrence, or I. And," she said, a little faintly, "I don't really think I can have a spark of pride, for I want you to help me to get to Jerry—I want you—in fact to finance the affair. It's—it's a degrading proposition. But, Fred—will you?"

Fred's dark face had grown rather grey, and for a minute he said nothing.

"I believe I know what you've wanted to say—I've known it all the afternoon. How can I answer you? I'd do anything that concerned only myself, and you know it. Oh, Jill, you to look at me like that! It's not honest, it's not like you—you who know! But this—I don't say it's impossible. Nothing you suggest could seem utterly impossible to me. But I must have time to think of it. Will you give me till to-morrow morning?"

She nodded dumbly and stood up, and to Fred's horror and distress she paused and trembled before she stepped out, her face towards the town. Fred's head was bent, and he was still getting his breath right, when she said in an extraordinary kind, sweet voice.

"This won't spoil the dances for me, if that's what you're thinking of. Directly the light and the music get into me properly, every atom of me will begin to dance, and I'll enjoy myself immensely. And, Fred, you'll have to come and see."

"I'm afraid I can't," he said hurriedly. "I've promised to stay with the old man till he goes to bed, and after that——"

"After that," said she, "you're coming to see me dance."

And however Jill managed it, Fred came. But he had still several hours fresh and cool with the morning in which to think things out, and he was with her again at ten o'clock. She had already finished her breakfast and stood in the window waiting.

"Grandmother Devereux found an unhappy young mother last night who's destroying her baby with the wrong drugs. The poor thing struggled hard for her freedom and her child, but she was routed at last, and grandmother's off to the infant with her black bag full of the right drugs and other implements of torture. The drawing-room's empty."

"Jill, I've thought it all out, dear, and I'll tell you what I'll do. If you will write to Jerry to-day and tell him what you want to do, I shall write too, and we'll ask him to cable without a minute's delay for you to go out. This is only fair to him, and to you, and," he added vaguely, "to all of us. It will only just be the delay of three weeks."

In breathless silence, Jill stood and looked at him. She saw with curious distinctness that his face looked wooden and unmoved. It seemed odd, when she could have cried aloud in her pain. She sat down before she could say anything. She was brokenly, bitterly disappointed. She had not gone to bed at all. She had thrown off her clothes, plunged into her bath and had then sat all that long sweet morning at the open window, going over everything methodically. She had arranged things beautifully. She was quite ready to sail by the next day's boat. She was rigid and numb with unutterable disappointment, but Fred had justice on his side, and she was forced into submission. She hated the inexorable sanity and righteousness in Fred's decision; she hated Fred himself, but without the whisper of a protest she bent her stubborn will to both.

"I thought I could have gone to-morrow," she said at last, in a strained harsh voice.

"That would have been an insult to Jerry," he said slowly.

He was leaning against the window. Jill stood up and coolly went over to search his face. Something she saw in it caused her to flush.

"If we weren't we, Jerry and I, it would be an insult for me even to want to go to him. But I think you—understand. It's really no more than natural."

Fred brought his eyes slowly back from staring out of the window.

"Oh, I understand," he said, very much as though he did not.

Jill threw up her proud head, but remembering that one had always to make allowances for Fred, presently she softened.

"Oh, you'll understand some day," said she. "At any rate, I knew you wouldn't fail me, Fred. Do you know I often think I've been rather a brute to you?"

"Rot!"

"I'm afraid it's solid truth. I say, Fred, do you mind the unwomanliness in this business particularly?"

Her voice was eager, her eyes piercing.

"Well, not especially. You see it's you, Jill."

"That's just exactly what Jerry will say too. I think I've trained you well, both of you. And other people don't matter," she added cheerfully. "If they think it's due to themselves to protest, directly we come home we'll dazzle them back to common sense! But Grandmother Devereux! Oh!"

"I think I can square her," said Fred coolly.

"You? You?"

Fred reddened unaccountably.

"I—I rather want to talk about Grandmother Devereux. Can you wait? Do you want to get to your letter?"

"Of course I don't. I'll put an extra stamp and send it to-night. Let us sit out on that ivy balcony. It won't come down, will it?"

"People will see you and want to be coming in."

"I shall see them first and tell them I'm out. Pull that blind an inch higher. That's perfect. Now I command the situation."

"I suppose I may now sit down?"

"Yes, and smoke."

"Jill, don't you think her eyes are much worse?"

"I'm afraid they are, but I daren't ask her. It's the one single thing I daren't venture into. I can't understand why she should resent it so bitterly."

"I can."

She flung a look at him and the words on her lips changed suddenly.

"Do you think she may go blind?"

"I am sure she will unless something is done to prevent it."

Jill whistled softly.

"You know Mr. Colne who came twice with my uncle and talked to her the whole time? He's the best oculist in London. He came to judge of her eyes."

"And you brought him?" Her own eyes blazed.

"You see, she's so difficult."

"So are you," said Jill dryly. "Not to say a word to any of us—not one word!"

"What's the use of jabbering till you know?"

"Dear me, none!"

"He says he's certain that it's cataract, and that she ought to have an operation at once. It will probably make her see as well as ever. Both eyes are affected."

"Oh, you to have found it out! Jerry and I never even guessed anything but old age. It's rather baffling."

"I had cause to know," said Fred, flushing. "I dare say she'd have had her eyes seen to long ago if she hadn't had to stump up for me. Colne thinks they might have been done years ago."

"One wants knowledge from doctors, not thoughts. That can only be a guess. I don't suppose you had a thing to do with it," said Jill grandly.

"If I had I shall certainly never know it from any of you. Meanwhile, I am going to make Grandmother Devereux see this man. Lucky she likes him, isn't it? She'll be only ill a few days—about ten," he pursued hurriedly, "so in any case you couldn't go to Jerry till after," he added gently, looking shyly across at her. He looked away in a panic. There were tears on her eyelashes.

"It's quite clear *you* don't want any one to help you." she said, with irrepressible and rather inexplicable bitterness.

Fred looked strangely at her averted face. The tears still trembled on the dark fringe of the lashes, but her mouth was hard as iron. He sighed quietly and leaned over the balcony rails.

"As it happens, I want you to help me just now to make Grandmother Devereux give in."

"I shouldn't dream of interfering."

"You'll have to, in spite of yourself. And don't you see this will prepare the way for the other scheme? A great deal can be done with an old woman, however redoubtable, when she's laid on her back for ten days. And you won't mind so much leaving her when she can see quite clear."

"Fred, you're the best of us," she said, in her most level voice. "You beat Jerry and me hollow. So far as you're concerned we may just resign ourselves to looking up and admiring.—I have a crick in my neck already, and my throat is sore from shouting applause. You'll be the one big man in the family; no thanks to any of us."

"Anything I shall ever be you've made me, you and Grandmother Devereux."

"Anything you'll ever be yourself and a demoniacal pride will have made you."

"At least I've not disgraced any of you yet," said Fred proudly, "to be thrust out in the cold like this. How unfair you can be, Jill!"

"I can't take being fairly bombarded with hot coals in the spirit of meekness. They burn me."

"Grandmother Devereux could never be as unkind as this, Jill."

"Even in her nastiest mood, Grandmother Devereux loves God. I only fear the devil. It puts a great gulf between us. I never look at her properly but I know it." Her eyes darkened. "Perhaps some day," she said slowly, "I may get across the gulf. Who knows? You'll have to look out for yourself then, my fine Fred. Then I'll feel quite equal to you."

"Oh, Jill, I've never been called a prig before."

"How touchy you can be! As if I shouldn't feel equal to

any prig living. Prig, indeed! If you were only anything half so easy! We're both growing dull, however. Fred, get the horses, do, and we'll go riding and enjoy ourselves."

She put her hand on his arm, and her warm face was close to his. An odd flush of feeling swept it suddenly, altering it to something so sweet and desirable that the foolish young man, awe-stricken, lowered his reverent gaze.

"I feel such an outcast beside you," she sighed. "Can't you imagine how annoying it is? Be quick with the horses, I'm gasping for a ride."

When later in the afternoon Fred had seen Jill safe off to a tea-party, he marched upstairs and asked Mrs. Devereux to give him some tea. As he drank it he felt younger and more dependent upon her bounty than he had done in his most dependent days. He felt, in short, unaccountably ashamed of himself. It struck Mrs. Devereux with some dismay that the boy was perhaps in love—"a most untoward circumstance," she thought disapprovingly. "It will make him unbearable, and may spoil his chances for honours. And he has lofty notions, and will like something he can't possibly understand. If she's not a fool, she's quite likely to be a knave with an eye to the title. To appreciate poor Fred at his real value calls for a little matured wisdom."

"More tea, Fred?"

"I've already had two cups, haven't I?"

"Well, why not a third? The young men who have tea with me drink invariably three cups. I put it down to Jill," she added artlessly, peering into the milk jug. "Tea may injure the coats of their stomachs, to be sure, but it appears to comfort their more emotional parts. In my young days it used to be cake and wine. I dare say, on the whole, that tea is a less poisonous sedative."

"It's not love," Fred assured her. "But I'm not sure that it's not quite as uncomfortable a state. The fact is, I want you to do something for me."

"My dear Fred, I should hardly have thought so simple a matter would need three cups of scalding tea."

"It's not so especially simple, and you'll detest it."

"If there's one thing more than another that I do detest, it's preamble."

Fred could be as uncompromising as herself.

"Your eyes are spoiling everything for you, and you can hardly know how they worry us. I want you to have them seen to now, before you go home. It should have been done years ago."

"I have lived now a good many years in the world, Fred," she said at last slowly, "and on the whole I have found it best to manage my own business."

"Your own business has always been to do everything for all of us and forget yourself. It's ours at last to remind you of your one omission. You've forced us into interfering."

"Speak for yourself, pray. I hardly think that either Jill or Jerry——"

"Jerry! Neither should I, if I had Jill to think of—in that way. It would put everything else out of my head."

"Humph!" she muttered. "I'm glad that thinking of Jill should make at least for right feeling and reticence."

"I have claims upon you they never had," said he, with quiet persistence.

"Oh, indeed!"

"They had a right to your care and your money. They belonged to you. They bore your name. I had no right whatsoever; I was next door to a stranger, and you have done more for me than for either of your own put together."

"I hope, Fred, I had breeding enough——"

"You had so much that it made me feel rather unequal to it for fifteen years."

"I—I fail to grasp your meaning."

"You overwhelmed me with your goodness and it would have been more than my life was worth even to thank you. You forgot," he said, his eyes on the ground and looking as though he were confessing to a crime—"you forgot that I, too, had a thin skin, not half your common sense, and none of your experience. And no one but himself knows

how appallingly imbecile a boy can be. He only finds it out himself when it's too late. Grandmother Devereux, you made me suffer a lot, and I mean to have my revenge. You owe it to me. It's a debt of honour, and you wouldn't be you if you didn't pay up like a bird."

"Continue, pray. I am surprised at nothing."

"You've been wanting to have this operation for years. The first put-off, I'm pretty sure, was my outfit and expenses for Eton. Ah, you can't say it wasn't. Then it was Oxford. Then something else. It was me, always me! You owe me a lot. And now I want my pound of flesh."

"It is interesting to sit at the feet of the young and learn our mistakes."

"Think of seeing everything again as clear as day! You've never seen Jill for years, not really—you know you haven't. That alone would be worth the annoyance of giving in to me."

Mrs. Devereux closed her lips and sat bolt upright in her great chair. Then she arose grimly and stalked out of the room.

Fred wiped his damp forehead and gave a relieved sigh, but he waited, for he knew that she would come back.

When she got to her room she plumped down beside her bed and did her best to pray, but failed signally. She could only protest mutely against defeat.

"This," she said, standing up, "this is blasphemy. I'd better wait. To be trying to hoodwink the Almighty with prayer, when I feel like cursing! And at my age! Bah! To be had up before the judgment-seat of Fred—Fred! and what's more, to be found guilty!"

For a full five minutes she stood rigid before the window. Then she said aloud and slowly:

"There's nothing for it, nothing, but to make the *amende honorable*, and the sooner it's done the better."

She opened a box on her dressing-table and took out the little velvet bag that now looked shrunken and lean. Then she marched downstairs, took her seat, and resumed her knitting.

"It's my belief," said she, in a voice now modulated to a fine placidity, "that it's not our heavens that will surprise the half of us, but our hells. We make our hells, you see; a more competent architect has the fashioning of our heavens. That bland gentleman who last saw me said he'd want a hundred pounds for doing my eyes. One can't go to that sort of person with the outward and visible signs of reduced income scrawled all over one. I wore my old sables and drove in Amelia Wickham's carriage. If he knew the truth, he'd probably lower his terms. But since you've taken me bodily in hand, you'd better make what arrangements you like. There are forty pounds in that bag. You can supply the rest. My dear Fred, I'll thank you when I feel in a better frame. Meanwhile, we want a little rest, both of us. I'm glad, at least," she added, smiling, "that you had three cups of tea. You must have needed them badly."

"That," she said, when Fred had taken himself and the velvet bag off, "that's the man Jill ought to marry. If any one on earth could do so, he would bring her to her senses. Strange that it has never before struck me."

CHAPTER XVIII

It was no part of Mrs. Devereux's habit to do things by halves. Thus, after a sustained effort which left her fairly prostrate, and with a racking headache, she succeeded at last in humbling herself before God in prayer, and arose from her knees a meeker woman, if an appreciably more awful one.

Thenceforward everything she was told to do she did with rigid conscientiousness, offering neither opinion nor comment. She went about diligently obeying orders, a great silent grey wraith, adorned with an unutterably polite smile. She was always ready to converse affably upon general topics with the doctors, and when the day came whereupon she must lie down and deliver herself into their hands, she did it with unruffled dignity, and one short, soldier-like, sincere little prayer.

If Jill had fortunately not been wholesome and stout-hearted enough to laugh during this trying period, she must inevitably have shed scalding tears.

As for Fred, he suffered agonies of comical distress, but he kept his head.

The case was favourable and the patient an unparalleled one. The doctors were complacent to a degree.

"As if they knew Grandmother Devereux!" said Jill uneasily, when this monumental calm had now, for five days after the operation, continued unbroken. "It's my belief that if she can't begin to say things again comfortably, something inside her will snap and spoil it all. She was never made to bear this unbroken strain of amiability. Giving in to you was awful, and she's so distressingly thorough in her methods. Besides, she keeps herself up to the mark now by making me read the Bible," sighed Jill.

"I feel rather a beast," said Fred.

"And well you may! At the same time," she added thoughtfully, "there's really no reason you should, and there's less reason still to be surprised," she said rebukingly. "You must surely have foreseen what being a philanthropist amongst the Devereuxs would bring you to. I shall begin to talk of Jerry. Any mention of him always makes Grandmother Devereux natural. She'll soon bristle up and be herself again. She cares more for Jerry than for all the rest of us, living or dead, put together, so there's no earthly reason she should be mealy-mouthed in the discussion of him."

But it was not Jerry in the end who broke the unearthly spell of courteous reticence that was slowly strangling Mrs. Devereux and decimating her family. It was Jill herself, in her regal assumption of Jerry's conscience.

Finding the lady still docile, scriptural, and impervious, under the application of Jerry pure and simple, Jill, with artful intent, introduced herself beside him, rather, indeed, a step in advance of him.

Mrs. Devereux was lying on her back as usual, her long

limbs straightened out decorously, her large dauntless nose and chiselled mouth, from under the white penthouse of her bandaged eyes outlined firmly against a maroon curtain. She might have been a crusader carven in ivory granite stretched upon a white tomb.

In the face of Jill's insolent presumption, her imprisoned spirit, that had these many days been beating furiously at the bars of its cage, escaped at last in a fine flare.

"But," pleaded Jill, in a voice now genuinely meek—she was terrified lest unwittingly she had overdone it—"but it's natural that one should want to help one's husband."

"What you want is a husband who'll help you to behave yourself."

"Oh!"

"A rational man doesn't want an active partner in his affairs. If he is worth his salt, he'll manage them himself. He wants a wife who, by her restful trust and confidence in his discretion, will help him to forget affairs, and use her leisure in maintaining his honour and rearing his children. Women must be propelling themselves everywhere they're not wanted! What, pray, would you think of a man who insisted upon ascertaining personally how the housemaids did out their corners?"

"There's a difference——"

"It's the same principle throughout."

"Oh," said Jill, waiving her point in deference to the operation, "if a woman was so slack as to permit her maids to neglect the corners, she would deserve a husband given over to the dustpan. We're not speaking of women of that order."

"Of nothing so innocuously respectable. We're speaking of the raw material which goes to the building up of the latter-day young married woman in its most aggravated form—to my mind, the most shoddy of any latter-day product."

The unspeakable spell was fast giving way. Jill was encouraged to proceed.

"No," said she, in her most moderate tones, "I am not fit for the rôle. I have none of the qualifications. You can't be young and married properly now unless you do several things

for which I have no taste. I don't want to speculate on the Stock Exchange, or play high—or——"

"Spare me the completion of the ignoble list."

"But one must refute a calumny," said Jill, virtuously.

If Mrs. Devereux started a hare, she invariably followed it without reference to interruptions.

"It's my firm belief that what society does want is a few Petruchios let loose in the land. They'd soon put a stop to this playing with edged tools, coquetting with vice. They'd clip the wings of the fine madams whose chief aim in taking upon themselves the vows of matrimony is to re-arrange them to their liking, yet without offence."

"It wouldn't be a fair punishment. It would be one-sided. The supply—in everything—is in proportion to the demand. Besides, Grandmother Devereux, think of you—yourself with a Petruchio!"

"I? I? I'm much obliged to you, Jill. Thank the Lord, I did my duty and held my tongue. An honest, simple man with a decent temper was good enough for me. I had no swelling imagination; I required no Petruchio. Who's that creeping in on tip-toe. I'm not moribund, Fred. Come in like a Christian."

"It's delightful to find you so well."

Fred smiled cheerfully and settled himself in a comfortable chair. Upon his previous visits he had stood uneasily against a chest of drawers and avoided Jill's eyes.

Mrs. Devereux primmed her lips and waited. She felt the grim irony in this sudden ease of manner. For a passing moment she resolved to make Fred also feel it. But being an eminently just woman she paused to pick her words, and in the pause broke suddenly into a laugh. It was from that moment that she always dated the beginning of her true and enduring friendship for Fred, and resolved never to demean either him or herself by thanking him for all that he had done for her. But a few days later, when they were all standing breathless around her sofa, waiting until the bandage should be removed and the full truth known, when the delicate

nervous hand of the great oculist paused before he would venture upon the last test, Mrs. Devereux laid her own upon it arrestingly.

"I feel sure it will be all right," she said quietly. "I should like my grandson to take it off."

And so it fell that it was in the same moment in which Fred led her back into the blessed light of day that he was at last adopted into the Devereux family and the old woman's heart. And it seemed to this simple young man the joyful ending to a most weary bondage.

For first-fruits of his adoption Fred proceeded, in his uneventful way, to prove to Grandmother Devereux the stern sanity underlying Jill's mad proposal.

He and Jill thought, upon reflection, that it threw a doubt upon Jerry not to get it over with Mrs. Devereux before his cablegram came.

"You think this marriage, then, so eminently desirable?" said Mrs. Devereux.

Even in her overwhelming joy in her restored gift of vision the redoubtable lady made no boastful use of it. She confined herself to looking through any object, more especially man, in half a glance.

"It's so natural that it must be. It's Jill's hankering after completeness, after size," he said, with some hesitation. "They'll make rather a tremendous whole, these two!"

"They'll turn life into a great stage, if that's what you mean, and prance before the footlights with the utmost zest and agility. One day they may get tired of prancing."

"They'll never get tired together," said Fred stolidly, "and they'll never act."

"Hem! And Jerry without Jill will go to the dogs."

"Only so far as being a mere millionaire goes."

"I'm glad to see you have some spirit, Fred," she snapped appreciatively.

"And they love each other."

"Dear me, yes; that I never denied. Love comes in amongst the complications. Jill's love is sublime vanity, more

or less; Jerry's a confession of weakness. Jill wants some one she can show off; Jerry craves for a show-man."

"However you choose to put it, it's love. Together they'll make notable and effective figures in great dramas, and I dare say they'd both be extremely disappointed if they didn't, and so should we all. But together they'd go out barefoot and gay to conquer the world. Either way, it's love, and it's fine and honest."

"Your love," she said, gently regarding him, "is finer and more honest still, for it is born of a single mind, and calls for no footlights."

Fred flushed darkly.

"Oh, mine! Mine is folly!"

"At least it's fine folly. I can only hope that Jerry's wisdom will serve Jill as faithfully."

Mrs. Devereux laid her knitting down, and sat with crossed hands, thinking deliberately.

"She'd better go," she said at last—"she'd better go. If they must conquer worlds together, it's as well they should begin while they're fresh. It's an enterprise that calls for vigour. You're casting your bread upon the waters after a somewhat reckless fashion, Fred. I could wish that it might be returned to you in less material form than pounds, shillings, and pence. So far as that part goes, you shall be reimbursed in January."

"You know what I've hoped——"

"Because I've chosen to be a tame rabbit upon one occasion it doesn't follow that I mean to pursue the vocation for the remainder of my life," she flared out. "You're not going to ride rough-shod over us permanently, Fred, I can assure you, whilst I retain any remnant of my intellect. By the way, after the completion of this folly, you'll be returning to Oxford. Take my advice: don't let Jill interfere with your degree. No girl is worth failing for."

"I have never thought of failing. No man who cared for Jill could fail."

"Hem!"

"I'm afraid you'll find it lonely on the island."

"I shall have a great deal to think about—of Jerry and Jill conquering worlds, and you conquering yourself. I don't think I shall be lonely. Besides," said she, in a more robust tone, "I see now that there will be no standing Jill until she's herself conquered by love. The island is too small for her; she must go out to wrestle with her destiny in the open."

"Her destiny?"

"Some freak of nature has made it necessary that Jill must conform in the end and be a woman, but, unless I am vastly mistaken, Jill will never be a woman but at the point of the sword. Yet the destiny of woman is love. Jill must touch things herself and burn her own fingers, and there's no fire hot enough in the island for the like of Jill. I should always be thinking of this. It would get on my nerves. Why in the name of common sense couldn't I have one comfortable grandchild?"

"I'm glad it's settled," said Fred, with tame vacuity. The conversation presented difficulties to his grave mind.

"Until it's settled definitely I must ask you to say nothing either to my son or to your grand-uncle. Your grand-uncle looks upon Jill as a lost soul, Lawrence as a lost investment. He intended to marry Jill to a peer, and thereby refloat the family. It's just as well that I should explain the matter to both gentlemen."

Meanwhile Jill, in fullest confidence, had set her face, like the homing swallow, to the south, and was waiting, radiant and sure, for the signal to take wing. While she waited she made her frivolous, humble little preparations diligently, and when the waiting grew rather more unbearable than usual wreaked herself gaily upon Fred.

The preparations touched Fred in many points. They struck him as pathetic in any girl with a head so stately set, and with fingers obviously rebelling against the uses of a needle. They left him helpless and aloof, for who was he to interfere in such dear and intimate concerns? And the fluffiness of the articles produced and scattered recklessly everywhere made him feel clumsy. They caught on to his elbows and hampered his

knees. He put a ruthless foot through two objects which had rolled from off a stool and looked like snowballs, and was then promptly informed that they represented the hard labour of two weary days.

Jill laughed and mocked in the inspiring light of day, and at eventide settled, as usual, into her devastating seriousness.

Little things fell to peering out through swing doors, which the next minute closed jealously upon their treasure—a treasure rich, elusive, and of an infinite variety.

A great change was working itself out, through all her wilfulness, in Jill's life, which escaped in bright flashes. At odd minutes she was shy. This phase threatened finally to unhinge the harried mind of Fred. It sometimes struck him that to be called upon to watch Jill waiting, waiting for the last touch, was rather more than he had quite deserved. But when he came in one afternoon with the cablegram that was to give it in his pocket, his face was only, perhaps, a shade more quiet than usual. The message was brief, and to the purpose:

"I was married this morning to Jabez Simkins's daughter," said Jerry. "Circumstances peculiar. Letter sent by this mail."

It was late in July; almost every one had left town.

Lord Kendrick, however, was still up and found it to his profit and pleasure to pay frequent visits to Mrs. Devereux. In the matter of incense and the flightiness of the latter-day young female, she quite shared his religious views. He was likewise anxious to ascertain definitely that Fred's hanging about hired apartments was due to right feeling, and not to Jill's eyes. For like many another professional saint, the pious gentleman preferred orthodoxy when coupled with an income.

To-day he had come in to take observations upon this mundane matter, and confer with his dear sister in Christ upon the late abominable decision of an ecclesiastical court. Close upon his heels followed Lawrence, then appeared a blighted remainder or so, and finally a brace of limp lovers. They were all thirsty. For a sheer hour Fred fetched and carried tea-cups in a horrid dream.

Jill's laugh drowned lovers' sighs. Lawrence cackled and crowed. The sheep-like countenance of Lord Kendrick purpled with Protestant frenzy. Mrs. Devereux preserved, as was her wont, a rigorous calm, lightened by an incisive and glancing wit. Blighted affections, religious fury, yawning vacuity, the crackling of thorns, a girl's first sorrow, and his own quiet hopelessness blended desolating in Fred's faithful aching heart, raged maddening in his tired and patient brain. It was a nightmare hour, engraved in seared welts for many a long year to come upon his memory.

"Oh! the stuffiness of remnants," said Jill, when the last had gone. "Fred, open every window."

She surged about the room in a way not the least like her.

Fred, glad of a respite, was wrestling, a painful rush of blood to his head, with a little side window that in the memory of man had never yet been opened.

"She'll want all the air she can get," he thought grimly, "and so shall I."

Jill had sat down beside a table and was now watching him, her chin propped in her hand, musingly.

"Couldn't we do something to-night?" said she. "Suppose we show Grandmother Devereux the lights of London from the top of an omnibus!"

"Suppose you go out on the balcony and try to compose yourself. So far our actions may not always have been as fraught with worldly wisdom as one could desire, but at least they have never been gusty."

But Fred was already beside her, an open cablegram in his hand.

"Read it, Jill," said he, in a sad shaky voice. "You'd better read it yourself."

Jill read it.

"Ah!" she said. It was a half-sob, half-gasp, the sound with which a man takes a sudden wound.

Then she steadied herself mutely and handed it to her grandmother.

"So Jerry's married," she said, after a little pause, "and

I'm rejected, and how deadly sick he'll get of Nell. 'Peculiar circumstances.' That's Jabez being a genius. Imagine having to apologise on your wedding-day; it's rather low, don't you think. And it will be the island, after all, not South Africa," said Jill, with a little chalk-white face, all drawn together, "and everything I got ready was with a view to the sun. It's been a waste of energy, hasn't it?'

She laid her shaking hands down tight on her knee, and looked round towards the place where Fred had stood, but directly he had given her the message he had incontinently flown.

"Go away, Jill, go away to your room," said her grandmother gently. "It is best to be alone with grief."

"Won't it be extraordinary to have to call on Jerry's wife? But I forgot, it's she who will have to call on us. Won't she hate it!"

"Jill, go!"

Before Mrs. Devereux followed her own wise council, she rang for the cook and substituted a late little supper for the usual dinner.

"The child will be faint enough by ten o'clock," she thought sadly; "she must have food."

Then she collected all the fluffy fronts and fripperies and put them into the great basket where she stored things for future use. She called it her emergency basket. When everything was decent and in order, she went to her room, her proud old head so bowed with shame that she found it only too fatally easy to pray.

When Jill beheld scalloped oysters and grilled sole for supper, she felt it to be indeed a period of dire import, and her thoughts jerked back to that other evening in a life, centuries ago, upon an odd little island, when Jerry had come back to them after his first defeat. She threw a protesting glance at her grandmother, then she flushed slightly.

"Why is it that one always does associate Jerry with fatted calf?" she inquired, looking with unutterable loathing at the delicate food on her plate. But one little swift look up swept

back her pride; she attacked her supper as courageously as she had done that other miserable day of failure, sprung up now in her white face out of her relentless past.

Mrs. Devereux launched out valiantly upon Church matters.

"It's Jerry's wedding-day. Oughtn't we to drink their healths?" said Jill, when she had struggled through the nourishment deemed necessary to her widowed state, and the lank parlourmaid had carried herself elsewhere—"and confusion to Jabez's knavish tricks? Between them all, one's rather sorry for Nell. I hope she's an utter irredeemable, abject hearthstone fool, and can be content with kindness and babies. Jerry couldn't be anything else but kind, and anyone can have babies. A fool with flashes of wisdom might perhaps feel uncomfortable."

"Will nothing teach you diffidence, Jill, or dash your outrageous confidence in yourself? There was no formal engagement."

"No, isn't it fortunate? Otherwise people would talk, wouldn't they?"

"He may love her."

"Just now he may. She's a last straw, and he's clinging on to her. By sheer force of contact he may love after a fashion. She's little and pitiful and a victim to tricks, and she has a rosebud mouth, and wears pale blue—I can see her. But do people love last straws after they've helped them over? They honour them, I dare say, and they're bowed down with gratitude before them. It must be horribly uncomfortable for the one who's clung on during the crisis, and rather unpleasant for the straw, unless she's peculiarly constituted, so as to suit both the occasion and its inevitable results."

"You admit, I am glad to notice," said Mrs. Devereux sternly, "that Jerry will honour the wife he has chosen. In that case some day we may venture to hope that things will right themselves."

"Honour is rather cold comfort," said Jill, out of a long pause, "once a man has loved. It's like giving a shivering

creature a volume of Plato when he wants a fire. If a man has to think of honour every time he looks at his wife, he'll soon hate her."

"This—this is positively indecent!"

"Very likely, for it's the naked truth."

"What you've got to remember is, that Jerry now belongs to another woman."

"How much of Jerry?"

"It is neither your business nor mine to apportion Jerry out into lots. By every law of God and man he belongs, body, soul, and spirit, to her to whom he has given his name—our name also. If you would kindly remember that, it might perhaps help you to regain your self-respect."

"It's been no fair bargain. I'm certain Jerry's been tricked."

"Cease splitting frivolous hairs, Jill. Jerry is old enough to take care of himself."

"Against the wiles of genius and nature combined, I wonder if he is. Any little cat of a thing can follow her instincts blind and be a child of nature, and extremely effective."

"That, should it be true, is a fortunate circumstance. Jerry's wife will be able to manage her husband. That is the best substitute for love of which I know of, and makes for respectability. Nor does it get on the nerves as love, unhappily, too often does."

"My love would never have got on Jerry's nerves, and being with me would have given him nerve for anything. That's how we're made, Jerry and I. The mere fact of Nell can't alter nature."

"It will, I fear, have considerably to modify nature, or else disgrace the family. Nature is as much under the decent sway of circumstances as human beings, and as subservient to laws. Your wits can tell you that, without any modern education."

"Jerry and I would never have wanted to go against Nature. We'd only have been to glad too oblige her."

"I quite agree with you," said the old woman, less fiercely. "Jerry is one of the few men whose constitution seems to call for a fireside tonic, and it would be idle to deny that that's your rôle. Had you married Jerry, I believe that the happiness and success, and excitement and the sense of responsibility, which seem necessary to the vanity underlying so many of your motives, would have made you in the end a good woman, certainly a more humble one, possibly an amiable one. As things now stand, you may have to reach your salvation through the medium of more primitive emotions, and these things hurt. At the risk of seeming didactic I must say one thing more, and then dismiss this most unprofitable subject. Sound men, it may be well to remember, require no quinine, and you may find when your pride is tamed that to love a strong man is better than to dominate a weak. Although I'll freely admit that life becomes more amusing, possibly more developing—that a woman in her abounding all-pervadingness may prefer it—when she can take an equal hand in the game instead of being an onlooker at it. Likewise to shift the irritating details of the serious business of life into his wife's hands, may commend itself to certain masculine constitutions, while a woman will certainly not suffer from *ennui* when she has to organise the soul of her husband, possibly audit his accounts, before he can venture to hand them in to his Maker. Such partnership has its attractions."

"I wonder—I wonder if I shall be as hard as you some day," said Jill tonelessly.

"One can't treat iron with soft strokes," said Mrs. Devereux, in a harsh, broken voice. "It needs sevenfold fires and mighty blows. In no sort of way, Jill, do I seek to make little of this great and disastrous blow. You'd have been a magnificent wife for Jerry, while you'll make, I fear, but an indifferent one for any one else; unless," she muttered—"unless he has strength, grace, and a constitution of adamant."

Jill went over to the window restively.

"It would be nice to go for a walk. I wish Fred had come in."

"That," said Mrs. Devereux dryly, "would be a little hard on Fred."

"I really can't see why. Jerry belongs to us all, and in spite of ourselves we've always thrown most of our hopes into Jerry, and a few of our fears. He's been in all our heads always, and mostly coupled with me. Fred will have to rearrange him with me taken out, and Nell in my place. The sooner he begins the better."

"Perhaps he would prefer to do it alone."

"Fred thinks slowly alone. The redistribution may confuse him a little. He's a person whose intelligence you want to jog sometimes."

Jill was drumming in an irritating way on the pane. Mrs. Devereux, whose nerves were fairly racked, contained herself with some heroism, and continued calmly:

"I've been thinking lately that we ought to throw some of our hopes into Fred."

"Into Fred! Fred is a certainty. He calls neither for hopes nor fears."

"A sure shield and defence," said Mrs. Devereux presently, out of the silence.

Jill hesitated, coloured, and lifted her head with a proud, impatient, little gesture.

"Oh, he's a rock."

"A rock limits one's activities, to be sure, and being self-contained and sufficient unto itself is not conducive to vanity. But it has its merits, I think, when one is tired."

Jill twirled round suddenly and dropped into a chair.

"It has," said she; "that's why I'd just give anything to see Fred. He's so sure and uneventful, and sober and—and grey. He'd rest you, if anything could."

"Since he's not here, suppose you lie down on the sofa."

"I wish I could," said Jill, chuckling, "and let down my hair and read Jerry's old letters and look at his daguerreotype—that done on the island by the oldest inhabitant. It would be such a satisfactory wind-up to everything. Then when I'd washed his image clean off the tin-plate with my tears I

might follow a host of leaders and start fair upon another object."

"That course would be a passably sane and human one, free of danger to any one, and certainly respectable."

"I shall be respectable always, but I must still be me."

"A three-fold friendship," said Mrs. Devereux, pursuing her own train of thought, "at the instigation of one of the three is never satisfactory. It resolves itself into two active partners and a dummy."

"You speak as though we were just like every other person, Jerry and I."

"Whatever Jerry may be, he's not a marble saint. He's a human man with a flaw in him."

"Must you always be thinking of the flaw?" she cried passionately. "One doesn't want to squat down like a Buddhist and worship immaculate perfection all one's life, to end in a sort of smug imbecility. No Devereux woman that ever I heard of has done it yet. All the men they loved had flaws, and they always loved them! Had Grandfather Nat no flaw at all?" she asked haughtily.

"I was more simple than you, Jill," said Mrs. Devereux, white and quiet, "and when the time came to do so—it came very soon—but I had foreseen it and had made ready—I was quite prepared to lay down my ambition for my love. Besides," she added, with less apparent docility—"besides, I have yet to learn that I ever contemplated making an unwelcome third upon any throne. I detest false positions. The slippery edge of any throne designed for two has never, I am thankful to say, had any attraction for me. I also am tired, Jill, and must ask you to say good-night."

The next morning, throwing a slant-wise rapid glance at her descendant, Mrs. Devereux observed pleasantly:

"I've been considering, Jill, we could quite easily manage a little tour somewhere before we go home. After our dissipations the winter in the island may seem long enough without the autumn also."

"I've been considering too," said Jill, looking rather proud,

"and I think the Island will be nice on the whole. Something in the air there makes it easy to hold your tongue, at least. Here your thoughts seem to drip out in a slummicky sort of way. London ought to civilise you, certainly, but it doesn't seem to, not in three months. I was only thinking last night how funny it was ever to have hated the island in the way I did. It seems so absurd to have squirmed before the darkness and the devil, and the screeches of Jally. Such a storm in a tea-cup as it was! Now none of it seems worth while. In a mild way the island will be delightful, and you should be back for the pig-killing and the bacon-smoking. Couldn't we go home at once, and let Fred go off on his visits? Couldn't you write and tell him that I've stopped howling among the tombs and would like a last ride round the Park?"

But if Jill had one little last glint of pride still a-flicker within her, Grandmother Devereux had several sparkling bright, and the girl's hard little repulse hurt her bitterly.

"To be above human emotion is to throw scorn upon God, who has never yet made a monster, or despised a grief," she boomed majestically. "Let me tell you, moreover, that bottled-up woe breeds poison. Every reputable emotion requires light and air to keep it sweet. Even a disreputable one may disappear in a wholesome blast."

Mrs. Devereux gathered up her knitting and stalked out of the room imperially.

CHAPTER XIX

Just five weeks before the sending of his cablegram, Jerry, having eaten and drunken of Jabez's best, was sitting out on Jabez's verandah, smoking his incomparable cigars and talking to Nell. He found it impossible, so closely associated in business as he was with Jabez, to disassociate himself, save fitfully, from the gentleman's gargantuan repasts. One must reason with one's adversary in the gates. Thus Jerry continued to endure the incisive and burthensome hospitality of Mr.

Simkins with fortitude, and extracted a mild sense of martyrdom from the sustained effort involved in labouring three days a week through eleven courses, and being for many stricken hours after them, a brother to Nell. This manner of thing takes it out of a man with the thermometer at 90.

Jabez maintained, meanwhile, a delicate reticence in regard to his conditions, but the shares still fluctuated, and Nell grew white and thin, and her sad eyes widened. She put on no airs of blighted affection, however. She was docile and kind; she made cheerful conversation, as she had always done, brewed tea and mixed drinks obligingly, besides playing at the usual intervals upon her stringed instrument. At Jerry's request, moreover, she wrestled periodically with the mysteries of reputable music upon her fine new piano.

But she flushed miserably when Jabez lured his other guests away to look at new prints, or prize roses, or pigs, or poultry, or his unutterable book of autographs, in order to leave her alone with Jerry. She often wept in secret when she found little references to Jerry and herself flecked lightly about the local journals. But she sat up in her bed dry-eyed, with clasped hands, the whole of one burning night after she had come upon her father chuckling over one of these pleasing announcements, and slapping his thigh with a flabby hand till the gold jingled in his pocket, a habit he had lost under his wife's genteel guidance, but lately resumed. Nell knew now for a certainty who it was that had inspired the abominable paragraphs.

She knew now that her father held Jerry in the palm of his hand, and young as she was, she knew something of her father's methods. He would wring Jerry dry without moving an eyelid, unless indeed Jerry did what was expected of him to do—marry her, to wit.

Nell was a foolish and sentimental maiden. She would have blacked Jerry's boots with ecstasy, but since she was pure and true, she was proud also, and her soul went down that night into a hell as deep as any instrument so light and unskilled could fathom.

The next day she was so obviously ill that her father sent for the doctor, who called her complaint influenza, and gave Nell things to take down her temperature. And Jerry, sorry, resentful, and pitiful, called daily to make inquiries and bring flowers, also literature of a stirring nature. Jerry was always solicitous to bolster up the weakness of Nell.

And now, the very first day she was strong enough to sit up to dinner, he was uttering brotherly platitudes in her presence, whilst Jabez, thoughtful and unflinching, had carefully removed the two massive ladies and the bankrupt peer who completed the gathering.

"Mr. Devereux," said Nell suddenly, "you're very much mixed up with father in business, aren't you? Much more than you used to be?"

"What a funny little thing it is bothering about business!"

"But aren't you?" she said, with startling impatience.

Jerry shrugged his shoulders good-humouredly.

"Well, yes, I am. But, Nell, why?"

"Oh, only that I wish you weren't."

"I don't pretend to say it's an unmixed blessing. I began being independent so young, you know, that I think it's spoilt me for any partnership."

"Couldn't you be independent again?"

She caught her breath and looked up in his face boldly.

"You see—— But you couldn't understand, Nell, and it really doesn't matter."

"I understand very well, and it does matter." She spoke in a little gaspy passionate way that amused Jerry mildly; it was so oddly at variance with Jill's straightforward impertinences. "I do understand," she went on, in a firmer voice. "I've been among mine proprietors since I was born. Mining is in my blood. It's not the first time I've watched things." She broke off short.

"I mean to play a single hand again," said Jerry soothingly. "You're quite right. It's better. But I can't just yet. I've thrown all my available capital in with your father, and I can't very well get it out without his help."

"My father will never help you," said Nell, slowly. "Unless—unless——"

"Unless what, my dear child?"

"It doesn't matter," she murmured. "But—you're—in to your neck—and," she said precipitately, "there'll be—the deuce to pay, and if father forecloses there won't be a rag, even of honour, left to you, and wait till you have to face the shareholders! The thing won't admit of explanation——"

"Nell, what on earth——"

"I can't help it!" she cried out. "I did listen through the wall when I was ill. I listened as hard as ever I could. Father and Mr. Buck—they have your neck in a noose. Mr. Devereux, why don't you throw up the capital and go? You'll soon make it up. Any one," said innocent Nell, with artless scorn, "any one can get money here. Just look at the people who have it! I think—I think if—if Jill was here that's what she'd tell you to do. And—and oh! I do—feel—dreadful——"

And then the poor little thing, bred in languishing gentility, with a mere thread of a constitution, huddled down in her chair and went off in a faint.

Jerry felt desperate, but lost no whit of his dexterity.

Nell awoke to find him staring down at her with much wonder and some tenderness.

"I'm so sorry," she said humbly—"oh, I'm so sorry."

"Nell, you're good and true," Jerry said gravely, "and a real friend. And there's no other straight road out of the mess. I'll have it out with your father as soon as ever I can."

"And go?"

She smoothed her hair with her hands, and pulled her frock down over her toes primly, and drank a little wine.

"You'll do it soon?"

"At once."

"And you'll go?"

"I'll chuck the money and go."

When Jabez returned with his sweltering guests, Nell having slipped off to hide for just one little minute, Jerry was stalking up and down the verandah, big with the renunciation of a fortune.

It was a dreadful night. The air was thick and dull, variegated shafts of light were fleeing in odd gusts, driven by no breath of wind, across the heavy purple horizon. The leaves of the trees shivered in the stillness for sheer fear.

The guests, overweighted with champagne, vague apprehension, and the atmosphere, lumbered off in their carriage; the peer finding fitting anchorage amidst the petticoats of two mighty and still unmated Jewesses.

But rigorous with resolve, Jerry stayed on, his imagination far too ardent and inflamed to permit him to wait soberly for office hours and a morning point of view. And Nell, womanish through and through, perceiving his unswerving and magnificent intention, and prostrating herself in spirit before it, was yet so terrified lest it should find common-sense utterance that she sat on inexorably and babbled, babbled, babbled, till at last there broke, sheer above their heads, a storm that sent the half-asleep Kaffirs whimpering on to the verandah, that made Jabez think sharply of his villainies, and damn the weather with such unctuous sincerity that it conveyed, even to himself, the impression of hurried prayer.

The bulging heaven belched forth its wrath and mighty griefs, and Nell trembled like a feather in the doorway, until at last Jerry, seeing that it would be madness to face the night, decided to postpone his momentous revelation until the morning, and went to his room.

So, knowing him to be now safe from any condign and immediate making of his soul—the one goal for which she was sacrificing every hope—Nell shivered off to her bed, and fell, utterly exhausted, into a deep sleep.

Jabez drove off the wraiths incidental to company promoting with sound champagne. Jerry, strong in proposed righteousness, slept the sleep of the just.

And the storm raged and screamed upon its course, ruthless and impartial, till at last one blue and golden serpent darted to and fro above the chimneys of snoring Jabez, then in the irresponsible skittish way of nature shivering off, flashed nimbly down Nell's chimney, right through a soft white wisp of

lace-trimmed clothing and a thin fleecy white frock, thrown tiredly on to a chair, out again through the open window, to blast and blacken a great scented bed of innocent creamy white roses. And the fiery touch had set all Nell's fluffy frills ablaze.

The flames shot up for a few minutes, harmlessly, scarce blackening the lofty ceiling, and then a little spark, rolling along, careless and irresponsible, got caught in a thick white fur rug, and crept through it smouldering till, suddenly grown greedy, it thrust out a fiery tongue that licked the air for prey, and, tired of vain searching, sprang eagerly towards the lace flounce of Nell's beautiful bed—spread, flared, and crackled gaily.

And presently Nell, who had been shivering in her sleep, felt exquisitely warm, and she found herself, oddly enough, in heaven, with Jerry's arms closing around her. Then they grew hot and smothered her, and some dreadful pain seemed to be eating into her breast. Even in her confused terror Nell thought that this surely must be sorrow. She knew it was when, in her dazed aching, she heard Jerry's voice bidding her hide her face, and found that he held her wrapped in a blanket in his arms, and was beating on through a smother of smoke and flames.

In building Nell's room Jabez had been pathetically careful to keep her secure from all danger of intrusion, having, in common with all his kind, a ferocious dislike and distrust of Kaffir labour. Her bed- and dressing-room, therefore, could only be reached by their own staircase, and her bedroom was the third opening out of two ante-rooms, in one of which an Englishwoman slept, but to-night she had gone down to the town to visit a sick daughter, and Nell was alone. The windows in all Nell's rooms were set, so as to be safe from natives, peculiarly high. Jerry, therefore, had to beat his way out through both the rooms. The landing tottered, the flight of stairs was nearly gone, but Jerry took a great leap, caught firm ground, and was out safe in the blackened garden; and then Nell gave one inextinguishable cry of anguish, and

when Jerry threw the blanket off her face it was working convulsively, and her fingers clutched and tore at the blanket.

"Jabez," shouted Jerry, "where are the women?"

Still half-dazed, Jabez lurched up, and with a sob that broke with a dull thud through all the roar of fire and tempest, he waited for no woman, but plucked off the blanket. A smouldering wisp of it had been pressed down upon the little thin child-like breast, where there was a great raw surface.

Jerry threw up his arms with a horrid cry. But in an instant he steadied himself, and saw at a glance that Jabez, now fully aroused from his half-drunken sleep, knew what he was about. He left Nell in his charge, shook a Kaffir or two into active obedience, got out a horse—the stables were saved, as well as most of the house—and, still in shirt and trousers, rode madly down the hill for the doctor. The tardy rain had come at last and poured in sheets. The horse slipped and plunged down the glassy slime of the hill.

"If I've killed her after all—killed poor little Nell!" thought Jerry distractedly; "it's just my luck. I never seem to pull off anything quite clean."

"There's brandy in that cupboard," said the little doctor, when he saw Jerry's face, nodding over his shoulder—"and sit down. Can't have you on my hands as well as the girl."

When they got out, cataracts of rain buffeted and beat men and horses; streams from the pent clouds ploughed the earth.

The horses, as they made headway up the hill, sprang frantically from side to side to escape the boulders swept from their moorings, that came slipping and plunging in their path.

They arrived to find Nell unconscious.

When the doctor came out of her room at last, something had thrown an odd little veil of a dignity half-grotesque across his chubby cherubic countenance, his indistinguishable blurred little features.

Ordinarily he was a brisk, cherry-like person, rabid for harmless gossip; a cricket with a motherly heart. Already,

although he was a bare forty-five, his voice was cracked with use.

Jerry's heart fell like stone when he now looked at the man. Nothing but death could thus trick out Dr. Logan with dignity.

"Well?" demanded Jerry.

"Well!" repeated the little cracked voice, striving hard after jauntiness. "I can't say this minute that it is very well with the child." He coughed, and melted off into his motherly way. "Our poor little lady hasn't as much fight in her as one could wish, and it's fight she wants just now. What's Jabez been after?" he added, sharpening up again. "I'll confess, now, that influenza was a poser. She hasn't the strength of a cat. She oughtn't to be feeling this shock as she does, at her age. Has Jabez been up to any devilry, do you happen to know?" he inquired blandly, with an unwinking stare. "Is the girl in love?"

"How can I say?" said Jerry stiffly. "She's burnt to the bone; isn't that enough for you, without love? How I came to crush that confounded blanket against her——"

"Oh, for God's sake stow untimely remorse!" said the doctor, who had his eye upon other game. "You risked your life to save the girl. Now, look here," he pursued, peering into Jerry's face, "I can't be blinded with any infernal sentiment. Jabez has his reasons for holding his tongue. You're a tame cat about the place; if any one knows, you do. What's at the bottom of all this?"

"I have reason to believe," said Jerry stolidly, after a short pause, "that Miss Simkins has been a good deal worried lately."

"Then the sooner the cause of the worry is removed the better," said the doctor, with a shrug. "She'll want a lot of curing, or I'm much mistaken. I'll wire the first thing for Compton, who'll do precious little with—ahem—that—on her mind. Have a wash and nip." He jerked his head back on his shoulder, and squinted queerly at Jerry.

Directly he had vanished Jerry dropped dully into a chair,

with a strained hideous feeling of having been felled by a blow from the inevitable.

The dawn rose pink and pure, and fragrant from its bountiful bath. The Kaffirs stole out fearfully to look at the blackened heap which had meant at sundown the Holy of Holies of that gorgeous house, the place wherein no single man Jack of them had ever yet set his intrusive foot. Then they stole round the corner to stare at Jerry, and wonder what was going on behind the closed doors. But they fled at the sight of the master growling out savage oaths under his breath and flinging in his turn odd looks at Jerry, who sat shocked and half stunned in his seat.

But, catching sudden sight of Jabez's face, he stood up haughtily, and with one glance reduced Mr. Simkins back to a tailor.

"Logan is anxious?" demanded Jerry.

Jabez felt that he might be a nigger, not to say a Christian tailor.

"He's anxious," he retorted, with feeble bluster. "An' well he may be."

"I'll take the wire for Compton," said Jerry, turning on his heel.

The white abject terror upon the wretched father's face made him fairly sick. And whether he rode or walked, or spoke or held his peace, from that moment fate had Jerry by the throat.

Meanwhile Nell raved on quietly, all under her breath. She was too docile for unseemly shrieking, but her persistence was a wonder, and she laid bare every secret of her heart.

Jerry would stand and listen to her, cold with wonder, and his thoughts, in spite of him, fly off convulsively to Jill.

"Jill—I think Jill, somehow, would die silent," he used to think. "Besides, one could so easily have silenced Jill."

When he had reached this stage, Jerry could have wished the earth to swallow him, or else would slink off guiltily, to make one more bid for freedom and his love. It was a regrettable position for any man; the only thing left him to do

was to throw up everything and fly. Yet with a woman's life trembling in the balance flight was a course open to many objections.

Jerry's quivering hand faltered upon the helm; he felt hag-ridden; and already he had begun, in the secret recesses of his soul, sincerely to pity himself, which condition of mind in a man six foot two in his stockings, brown with honest weather, and forty-inches round the chest, portends a sad and bitter state—may mean, indeed, a last good-bye to greatness.

"Jill was right," he would think, himself lowering a shade too big in his meditations, as he looked down upon Nell pathetically. "She ought to have come with me. Jill—Jill knows." In which saying there was indeed more pathos than Jerry either understood or intended.

Upon the third day after the accident, towards the evening, there came a change in the spell that held the house. Into the slow stillness there crept a silent, grisly, dreadful little bustle, and Nell's watchers all looked in each other's faces oddly, and at every unobserved moment the diffident ferret eyes of Jabez slid round to fasten themselves upon Jerry.

To escape this blear and discomposing glance Jerry had now for some time been walking up and down the verandah, as amiable as any other trapped beast. But, moved to a better mood by Nell's moaning, which floated out upon the silent air unceasingly, he stole into the room to look at her, to wonder if by any chance he could bring himself to kiss the poor little thing, to speculate upon the probable effect the kiss would have upon Nell. The potentialities involved in this last surmise made Jerry's flesh creep. He had not been there long enough for experiments, however, before the doctor sidled in after him, with a succession of queer little puffs.

"Each action of the little beast's seems to be heralded in with a new noise," Jerry thought irritably.

The doctor threw on his mask of dignity with a flourish and a puff more urgent than any preceding it, and with a magnificent gesture ordered Jerry out on the verandah, whither he followed him hot-foot.

"Well?" inquired Jerry shortly.

"Merely to say," said the little man testily—he revelled in lovers, but there was more problem than lover about this young man—"merely to say," he repeated pompously, "that Miss Simkins is about to regain consciousness, and everything depends upon how it goes off."

"Hm! You put it neatly."

The winks and innuendoes of the little creature had for the last three days been flicking Jerry like a whip.

"You must keep yourself up, my dear fellow. Your nerves are all anyhow. We men of the world," he chirped majestically, "do not, as a rule, use technical language to one another. We reserve that for the ladies."

He puffed up every feather, and the next minute, with good-humoured briskness, smoothed them, every one, down again.

"You must buck up, my boy. A lot depends on you. A stout peg is my prescription for the occasion."

Wherewith he covered his honest emotion with a leering wink.

For a minute Jerry felt so degradingly weak and unstrung that he could have throttled the foolish, kindly creature. The next he pulled himself together and laughed.

"You know as well as I," said Logan, "that the life of our little lady rests in your hands."

Forgetting professional etiquette, he was now fairly goggling his eyes in anticipation of the coming scene.

"This is playing up to the gallery with a vengeance," said Jerry, with an inward groan. "But since it seems to be my turn, come on. Anyway, I'll keep the peg for later on. Are the side-scenes shifted?" he asked savagely over his shoulders.

But the small pitiful face on the pillow brought him, as usual, back to a better mind. The glassy eyes seemed already to be staring less stonily, and presently they began to move restlessly from side to side, and the little hands that had these three days been picking and tweaking at the sheet touched each other in a feeble clasp, then lifted themselves up to him one after the other. The way of it was so wistful that Jerry's back grew cold and his eyes hot.

The doctor bobbed his round head, and made significant, imperious passes with his fat hands. There was a little murmur, and the women tailed lingeringly out of the room, a protest upon each offended face. The doctor retreated with an impressive air of self-denial to the window, coughed softly behind his hand, and settled down to blink slantwise. Otherwise Jerry was alone with Nell. He wished with a horrid stoop of the spirit and a smothered oath that he had taken the peg; then he fetched a hard breath, and buckled to the work before him.

Nell's eyes wandered restlessly, falling the instant they met his. For this he blessed them. But at last, compelled by the white, sad child's face, he thrust himself sheer out of the business, made a sublime effort, and held the poor faltering eyes steadily with his own; and slowly, slowly, slowly Nell obeyed the call, and her brain reached out, trembling and groping pitifully after its lost balance. Odd stirrings of memory found utterance in faint, long sighs, and her heart began to beat so hard that it stung into a sharp knife-thrust the smouldering pain in her chest. This finished the awakening of Nell. And Jerry's eyes for first greetings in Nell's found a little joy struggling with a great anguish. Giddy and confused, with the gesture of an impulsive boy whom some mighty injustice has broken, he covered his face with his hands and choked back a sob.

Nell's reason, however, was saved; and Jerry went out dumbly, and swallowed his deferred peg.

But as her reason steadied and cleared strangely, so surely did Nell's strength slip away from her. There Jerry's power seemed to cease. The odd thing about Nell was that, as her life flickered and waned, so her spirit rose, held, and flamed steadily. Nell lay patient in her bed, and developed gifts, in such a mouse of a thing, strange and startling. She grew quite wise, sometimes even a little witty, and her shy eyes went searching for the truth, and often found it.

Under this unexpected strain upon his intellect, Dr. Logan grew visibly thin. He was choking with emotions he dared

not disclose, and whenever he came upon Jerry he puffed like a grampus. Even his tutelary divinity, the consultant, began to view unhappy Jerry with mild disfavour, and to wonder where precisely his place in nature might stand.

The situation seemed in a vague way to revolve around Jerry. His solicitous activity was untiring, his resources invaluable. He never wavered, thought only of the little white girl on the bed, and yet his personal passivity remained unbroken, and seemed only too likely to continue to do so—and with millions wilting away before his eyes! groaned Dr. Logan in the silence of his soul.

During these tragic hours even Dr. Hay frequently whistled. And Nell's wits grew brighter, and her cheeks more hollow, and her eyes so clear and all-seeing that the sinners who stood upon their feet of clay about her bed remembered all the fair and beautiful things they had long forgotten.

The prick of wings which comes at some time to all of us—always, even though it be but once in a long and evil life—began now to trouble the watchers around Nell's bed.

Looking at Nell, soiled money-grubbers—for even in his uttermost woe society was essential to Jabez—hired men and women, Jew, Christian, and infidel, each in his turn remembered this moment, and went away to grope back through a dingy past, heaped with the unfertilising ashes of better impulses, to look once again up at that flickering star of his lost youth.

And Nell in her new wisdom knew for what she had set them all searching. She laughed softly after a somewhat unearthly fashion, and began in the sweetest way in the world to tyrannise over the whole twittering crowd. The shy, child-like, halting creature bloomed slowly out into a little white queen upon a white bed, and gave laws to her subjects.

One day she commanded the two doctors to her presence. When they came she made them prop her up with pillows, and ordered every one else out of the room.

It seemed to all who saw her that Nell was playing at life,

just to see what it was like before she went forth to taste of death.

Jerry, in the shadow of a pink oleander, was dashing the tears from his eyes.

Jabez, as complex and human, was flinging heathen and devouring oaths at a boy who, in his grief, had forgotten to shut the ice chest.

"Will you stand where I can see you?" said Nell to the doctors, when they had laid disapproving hold of her small inert wrist, ending up, honest men, in a vindictive stare at the living, lambent spirit triumphant in her great eyes.

Then their eyes met professionally above Nell's golden head, speaking volumes.

Nell knew what they were saying without any glance at all. She had known it this long time.

"Stand where I can see you," said she, with a regal nod—"it hurts me to crane my neck.—I have so many questions to ask you. And please give me some wine. I seem to get tired in one minute."

Dr. Logan fussed and bustled, and in his sincere agitation spilt half the wine over the lovely embroidered coverlet.

Nell threw the corner of her white shawl across the stain, and smiled up at him.

"Never mind," she said. "It's really not half as bad as it looks. It's quite easy, in a way. You just lose hold of things, and it's not worth while to catch on again. That's how it feels—except for the pain."

"My dear young lady," cried the scandalised consultant, "that's slackness, not death. I'm quite sure you are not a shirker. You must pull yourself together."

"But I can't. That's just the thing. I've lost the way, and neither of you seems able to find it for me." She watched both her critics with some languid interest. "Just look at your bottles"—she nodded at the white covered table—"all empty, and the beef-tea I've swallowed, and the extracts, and the crying, and the whispers! You should have heard them last night!"

"This is positively indecorous."

Nell moved ruthlessly.

"So many things are indecorous; my whole life has been spent in getting them off by heart. Surely death isn't one of them. If it's here, we must speak of it. Is it here? Am I dying? or tired just? That's what I want to know."

Dr. Logan was reduced to a state of numbed imbecility. It was for the other gentleman to explain the position.

"My dear child——"

"Do you know?" demanded Nell imperiously. "If you don't, some one else must come and find out. Do you know?"

Her eyes searched theirs inexorably. No man, however scientific, could then lie to Nell. The scene struck Dr. Hay as blasphemous, but it must be faced, and it hurt every inch of him.

"We cannot give you much hope," he said gravely. "The vital forces——"

"Ah, that's all I wanted to know. Why couldn't you tell me that before?"

"Do you want to die?" he demanded sternly.

"No—yes—no. No, I don't—not now—not now," she cried out; "but if I must—if I absolutely must, I have things to see about. Oh, oh, please send some one——"

The consultant hurried, in undignified haste, for anything in the shape of a woman.

But Dr. Logan went out to a dark nook on the verandah to recover; then he squared himself, threw out his chest, preened his plumes with a transitory though high-sounding oath, and set forth to find Jerry.

He found him smoking sullenly behind the stables, awaiting any chance call.

"Now, young man," said this doughty ambassador, his motherly heart all athrob, "you'll hear a home-truth or so, or I'll know the reason why."

Jerry started, stared, and pulled himself out of his gloomy reverie.

"*My* good fellow, fire away!"

"It's a sort of broadside you won't relish, I can tell you. If that girl goes on as she's going, she'll be dead in three days. She's slipping through our fingers. It's sheer waste of a life. She's being murdered, that child. And before God, sir, you're the murderer!"

Jerry threw down his cigar, and faced round on his tormentor.

"Damn you——"

"I won't be damned, sir—by a skunk, sir!" cried the little man, now, in the way of little things when once fairly roused, absolutely beyond himself. "No one shall damn me, I tell you, but a man. Would a man—would a man, I'll ask you—let that young creature die for want of a word, of a touch, of a k-kiss?" His thin voice broke in a cracked shriek. "Are you a stuck pig, young man, to stand dry-eyed and see her go out in this unnecessary way?"

"Really, Logan——"

"Confound your impudence, sir. Don't bandy words with me!" howled the doctor, now dancing up and down before Jerry. "My God, my God, didn't I bring her into the world, confound you? and through measles, and croup, and a diphtheria that stumped three consultants—M.D.'s of London, sir, the whole kit of 'em—and faith, 'twas love that did it," said the honest gentleman, "not science. And didn't my own, the same age to a day—didn't she die of it? I couldn't save her, God help me; but because I couldn't, little Nell there is the apple of my eye."

The little man plumped down on the edge of a cattle-trough and burst into a passion of tears.

"For God's sake, dry up, Logan. I'll—I'll——"

"She'll drift off into the grave, that's what she'll do, unless it's stopped."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, dry up, and let me breathe. Can't you see——"

"See!" squealed the doctor. "See! I see out of every inch of my body. I see an utterly unnecessary flower-bedizened little bit of a coffin—trust Jabez for style—and—good God, I wish I was blind!"

With a hysteric sob Logan lifted himself off his high seat, and scuttled off, wiping his eyes. He was still sniffing behind a throng of arbutus bushes when Jerry called him back.

"Look here, Logan," he said, "I'd like to tell you just how things stand."

Logan sniffed romance, and snorted.

Jerry's statement of affairs was a plain and manly one enough. He condoned nothing, concealed nothing.

"It's not an engagement, you see," he concluded, "but it's sacred, and I love the other girl."

Dr. Logan's soft hair was all fluffed up like a young bantam's.

"It's the devil's own moon," he groaned, "and that infernal verandah. Between 'em they've diddled you both. God help the pair of you!" he jerked out brokenly. "And her constitution! She's too chronically below par to hope for any healthy reaction from love or any other disease. It's a pretty kettle of fish, that's what it is. Very pretty, indeed. Why didn't you tell all this to Nell?"

"I did, directly——"

"Directly the mischief was done. Very thoughtful of you, faith! Don't you know, at your age, what girls are?—girls with no constitutions and that complexion—not to mention climate and the mother. Why, if you'd been wry-necked, with a squint, habit, inexperience, and the moon would have done the confounded business for her, poor child. A respectable profession to be befooled like this!" he moaned.

Hereupon a murmur of feminine woe recalled professional instinct and deportment. He tip-toed majestically up to the verandah, and was stopped by a bevy of weeping women.

"Her father is with her, and no one must go in," they wailed.

"This is the last straw," said Dr. Logan, calm with despair. "Jabez'll pull it off this time, see if he doesn't. Where's Dr. Hay?"

"Miss Simkins turned him out."

"Turned out Dr. Hay? Gracious heavens! If—if I'm

wanted for the death certificate," he jerked, "you'll find me here."

When Nell had rested a little, too dazed and feeble to think, she sat up and insisted upon swallowing in one hour all the nourishment spread out discreetly over three, and every minute between the detested food and its enveloping fuss she spent in unravelling her thoughts from her dreams, for in this curious process they call dying they had all got mixed together. She had now sifted them till there remained nothing at all but two quite simple facts. They dazzled her a little, however, with their hard glitter. She had to lie quiet with closed eyes and face them by degrees, let them beat in upon her slowly bit by bit, and settle down till they were practically a part of her, and she could say them over and over to herself like a lesson.

"The thing is," she said to herself, curling up in her bed with her head bent down on her chest, always full of smouldering pain, for she could rest better like this—"the thing is, I'm dying, so I don't really matter now. Nothing matters but Jerry, and I must make things straight for him while I have sense. I'm dying and Jerry's living," she thought drowsily; "these are the two things. I wonder if I can stay awake."

She could not, as it happened. She fell off again into a little sleep. But she awoke soon and asked for beef-tea, and when she had swallowed it she sent for her father.

"Sit near," she said, "and don't interrupt. I'm dying. They both say it, and I know it. I know everything—I don't want any explanations. You've always given me everything I've wanted, and—Jerry Devereux came in among the things. Don't swear; it sounds so odd when you're dying. It couldn't be helped. There was another girl, and he loves her. And now you have him up to his neck, and the shareholders won't leave a feather on him."

"God Almighty——"

"Don't—not now! I listened and heard all you said. The thing is—the thing is," she murmured, slipping off into confusion, "the thing is—oh! wait. I have it! I don't matter any longer. So to—to square things—I want to marry Jerry.

I don't matter. Don't look like that," she cried with feeble passion; "it's the best thing, and I must have it. I'm so tired. Get it done soon."

"I promise——"

Her dim eyes flashed out at him.

"Don't promise. How can I tell—afterwards. You've broken promises before. Ever since I began to read—those papers—they've worried me. Those shareholders——"

"Good Lord!" muttered Jabez, when he had got himself out of the door, "good Lord!"

Dr. Logan bobbed up and down before him with round eyes.

"I can't bother with you, man! Fetch young Devereux. There in the other room—— Confound you, go! Come with him if you like—unless you prefer," he said with a sneer—Jabez was now beyond manners—"unless you prefer to listen at the door."

"The occasion, sir, compels me to excuse you."

The doctor spoke with dignity, but he flew like a bolt for Jerry.

Jerry stood stock still before Jabez, and drank in his doom.

"You're not lying?" he said at last slowly.

The answer was conclusive. Jabez sat stiff and stark, and of a sudden his eyes dulled like an idiot's, his head wagged from side to side. The doctor swooped down and loosened the man's shirt, laid him low, and for some minutes busied himself with professional zeal over the empurpled visage of the wretched creature.

"He's all right," he pronounced at last. "Parental solicitude aggravated by too much champagne. Jabez's been going it."

He gazed with far more anxiety at Jerry, looking across the blackened garden, his face altered and aged. His little face grew grave with concern; he went over and seized Jerry's limp arm.

"If you marry her, she'll get well. It's right you should know it—know it for a fact. Constitution, complexion—you can bet on 'em."

"God in heaven, man," said Jerry, in a thick voice, "can't you see that's what's holding me back? It's my life or hers. No man knows what a brute he can be till he's been put to it."

"Look out, Jabez, man, don't fall." The doctor put out a hand to steady him, then sprang nimbly back to Jerry.

"Whatever happens, lad, remember the poor child is straight. Don't go back on her! It's a sorry business all round. God help us all. But you can draw back still."

"I shall not draw back," said Jerry steadily. "I couldn't, not now. I'll go through with it."

He turned his hunted eyes with a curious womanish wistfulness in them upon the kind little man a glance which mightily upset Dr. Logan.

And so, for the second time the shuttlecock of fate, Jerry went forth to prepare for his ghostly marriage.

CHAPTER XX

JERRY rode off grimly for the nearest clergyman, who, being a man of promptitude, sentiment, and resource, had him married within the hour. The consultant, who distrusted variety in deathbed scenes and hated melodrama, drove discreetly off to his luncheon.

Throughout the ceremony the women whimpered uninterruptedly behind their handkerchiefs.

But Dr. Logan, albeit livid and his hair erect with dramatic agitation, wore an unflinching cherubic smile, and a dreadful little branch of orange blossom wagged in his buttonhole. He had strung himself up to a high pitch, and felt equal to anything—happily, indeed, for his offices were manifold. He had to watch Jabez, who seemed to hover upon the point of a fit; keep an eye upon Jerry, whose stolid, passive evasion of pegs was monumental in the climate and the circumstance; give away Nell; besides attending to her pulse and the responses, the one straw too much for that stricken crowd.

The doctor was, however, a stout stickler for professional etiquette and an upholder of the Church, and firmly resolved that Nell's marriage should be as orderly and decent as under the outrageous circumstances he could make it. He sniffed scorn thereupon at the women swaying and moaning, a watery-hearted bundle of reeds, and boomed out his portion of the service like a small cracked drum.

When the mystified clergyman had pronounced his last sentence, Dr. Logan flew for eggs and brandy, concocted a mixture, and brandished it before the bridegroom's eyes until in sheer self-defence he obeyed and swallowed.

"You've come to the scratch like a man," cried the little gentleman, his sob breaking into a weird crow, "and the Lord will reward you—I'm damned if He won't. And, after all, she's an angel, little Nell, and Jabez is a millionaire; and, dear lad, the girls we leave behind us are heavenly in the distance, to be sure, but they carry on like the very deuce as soon as our backs are turned. God help me, don't I know? And look at the Divorce Court romances, to say nothing of police court reports. Do you think I've heard no deathbed wanderings in my time? I've lived, I tell you, as well as another."

"I'm ready, thanks to your excellent brew," said Jerry, yawning and standing up. "What a stage-manager has been lost in you, Logan! What's the next scene in the farce?"

"I leave that to you."

The doctor stiffened himself proudly.

"Oh, come, doctor. You've been a brick from first to last, and——"

"I'm not as devoid of understanding, Devereux, as you seem to infer," he replied, with dignity, choking back a little cracked groan. "You've been pitchforked into this breach, and you're a bit sore; but you'll do us all justice later on. You'll admit that it's been no plant, even on the part of Jabez. Take my word for it," he concluded, with solemn cheerfulness, "however it looks, the hand of Providence is somewhere about in this deplorable business."

"Very likely," said Jerry, with a mirthless grin, "but a fellow likes to play his own hand."

The doctor, who had turned dejectedly on his heel, faced round again and squinted up at Jerry.

"My dear fellow, upon my word I feel for you—I do, indeed. That parson fellow's a good chap—excellent university degree, you know. Couldn't you, now——"

Jerry lay back in his chair and laughed. He laughed till his fevered, dry lips cracked and bled.

"For God's sake, Logan, go and see if Nell is ready for me."

Just as Logan, with a primmed reproving mouth, turned into Nell's room, a boy came round the corner with letters from Jill and Fred.

Ten minutes afterwards Jerry wrote and sent off his cable. Then he shut his mouth like a clam, and, heralded by a little gurgle of suppressed sympathy from a feminine crowd, he went into Nell's room and closed the door.

She was now fully awake, trembling, and her wide blue eyes looked up into Jerry's full to the brim of shy apology. This moved him from his stony courtesy. In spite of himself, Jerry was often a gentleman. He was upheld now, moreover, with the fine spirit of the martyr, and capable for the moment of great deeds.

"Now, Nell," said he, with admirable cheerfulness, "what you've got to do is to be obedient and get well."

"Oh, not that," she said, with feeble eagerness; "that's all settled, you know. But will you stay with me all the time till——?"

"I'll stay with you till you get well," said Jerry, with a stubborn smile. Then he sat down to lift his wife out of the apathy of dying.

And because she had not the spirit of a mouse, also because love is greater than death, she yielded at last to the pressure brought to bear upon her, and upon the third day began to struggle back to life, always meekly apologising.

Directly Jerry saw her safe, a conviction seized him that

if he looked one minute longer at the ridiculous humility in her eyes he would certainly go mad. He tried to clear a sudden darkness out of his throbbing eyes, the singing out of his ears. In order to cool his burning brain, by sheer reflex action, he kissed Nell, the action usually making him shiver; then he caught her arm, shook it convulsively, and told her what he had told her so often before in the course of these nightmare hours—to stop humbugging and get well. Then he lifted himself up, stupid and vacant, and grinned, and chuckled, and laughed till Nell sat up in her bed and cried aloud for fear. Whereupon the doctor, prepared for anything, and watching like a cat, swooped in, quieted Nell, dragged Jerry forth, and put him to bed in a darkened room.

And thanks to a big body and a strong brain Jerry came back eventually to sanity and a partially invalided wife, permanently bowed down with gratitude, mute apology melting always through her limpid eyes.

Meanwhile Mrs. Devereux and Jill were back in the island to wait for letters and evade each other's eyes.

Rain or shine, Mrs. Devereux went forth each morning to the fields mounted on her great gaunt horse, to oversee the labourers. Time, indeed, she did oversee them; for, through all her weary years of semi-blindness, her people had been growing lax.

There was no room for the young in that little island. Directly the longing came they all drifted west. Every man who worked for Mrs. Devereux was, therefore, nearly as old as herself, and during her absence—the first for thirty years—to a man they had rested and restored themselves. Having lived largely on a vegetable diet, dreams, and a seductive atmosphere of hope, to loiter in undisturbed amiability through the idle hours of a blessed summer's day was a temptation so exquisite that no man in his senses could do other than hug it gratefully to his submissive breast.

Mrs. Devereux, on her return, found the hay seeding, the

cows padding reflectively through the ripening grain, the pigs roaming fitfully through the old gardens.

As she rode now at funeral pace down the avenue in a wide hat and a sweeping green skirt, in which fifty years ago she had ridden decorously to the covert side, she halted, fetched up by the thought of Jill alone in the great echoing house.

To be herself on the field in good time was her only possible method of inducing her work-people to be there likewise. The painful fact appealed to the sense of chivalry latent in these dilettantes in agriculture.

"They wouldn't disappint the ould misthress, begor! Shure, 'twould be a sin not to humour her, now she got back the sight of her eyes be a miracle. An' indade twor a thrate to see the same ould eyes rakin' round on sthicks as keen as a weasel's."

A seven o'clock breakfast has, however, its drawbacks for a lonely girl. Mrs. Devereux wheeled round her lean charger, who pounded slumberously up the avenue again, and with a new understanding his mistress glanced up at her children's graves.

"It is a bleak, stripped life for the unhappy child," she thought, "not even a parish to torment, nor an altar to make blasphemous, nor so much as a curate to reduce to complete imbecility. English poverty has certainly its compensations. Besides, in no country can you be a village philanthropist with nothing to do it on. You must forget everything but your own flesh and blood, and bare justice. Dear me! the acid of poverty does bite sharp! To visit the poor when one daren't be generous! The bitter farce of it! In any case, Jill's visitings invariably end in further depressing the rent-roll. They must be discouraged. The child has neither fads nor accomplishments, and you can't play games with the winds of heaven." The lady glanced up at a cloud of wheeling white gulls above the heavy drooping green of the woods. "As for nature——" She sighed. "I quite see now that Jerry was her one wholesome outlet. She'd better have the garden and Larry." She paused to look

wistfully at the smother of vegetables, fruit, and flowers all crying for care. Gardening had been her one solace, she longed to be at those disorderly beds. "She'd better have the garden." She sighed again. "I wish I could give out sympathy; at my age you can't begin, and it would be lost on Jill, after all. She's utterly selfish." She drew up before the door and called out for her kinswoman. "Yet, when one thinks of it," she reflected, as she waited, "Jill's selfishness has always all been centred in Jerry. He has always saved her from herself. The garden, I fear, will hardly do so, and it may spoil her beautiful hands; but I've nothing else."

"My dear Jill, want of promptitude is not generally one of your failings. There's a quantity of seed to be gathered in the garden, and cuttings to be taken, and my time is fully occupied. Could you undertake to see that this is done properly? I can give you Larry."

Jill's eyes sparkled.

Mrs. Devereux was covertly searching her face, but her own was as detached as usual.

"Oh, I can do it. I've watched you often. You've only to be careful to do nothing that Larry suggests."

Mrs. Devereux's eyes had strayed across to her one distraction.

"Flowers are like children," she said wistfully: "they want understanding and patience. You can't work off your ill-humours on them, any more than you can on children. They need consideration."

"If you'd rather not trust me——"

"I wish you merely to understand that it is a trust."

"I'll do my best to be worthy of it. I'll take care that blighted affection doesn't lay the roses low."

Mrs. Devereux pounded forth again on her charger, and Jill had a new object in life. Perhaps it helped her; at any rate, she did her work well, and remembered even to wear gloves. But her mouth hardened quietly, and her pleasant boyish frankness was fast deserting her. Her passionate heart

was too sore for this innocent work amongst inanimate things. Jill wanted something she could fight for or hurt—which, at the moment, mattered but little. Sometimes she was forced into laying hold of Larry and making him say something, but he had neither heart, wit, nor wisdom, and from constantly devouring raw carrots was generally hiccoughing.

"Where's the boasted humour of your race?" she inquired one day. "Why weren't you made different, Larry? You might have been so useful as—a grief eraser."

"Oh, Lord, miss!"

"It wouldn't have hurt. It would have run through you like a sieve."

"Eyah now, Miss Jill, like the messages do be doing."

"Just so, Larry."

Jill clipped on with dispassionate calm. Larry sat on his haunches beside his pronged fork and gaped.

"Since you know nothing of the gnawing worm, Larry, you'd better go back to your weeds."

"Faith, an' shure enough I had," said Larry, scrambling to his toes, "for here's th' ould missus leppin' acrass the green like a leveret. God be good to us, but 'tis the fairy eyesight she do be havin' sence she got it back."

"I'll go to meet her, Larry."

The colour was all running out of Jill's cheeks.

Larry cackled with relief, and with conscientious industry fell to concealing weeds under mounds of gravel.

"I've read his letter to Fred," said Mrs. Devereux. "Fred sent it to me. You'd better take both to your room."

Jill dropped on a bank.

"I'll read them here. Ah, pages!"

The words had been thrown down upon paper at fever heat. It was truly a document to open all the shut gates in a girl's heart.

When Jill stood up she felt so heavy with human lore that she had to sit down again. The silence pressed in on her so chokingly that to break it she sang a little snatch of song.

The imbecility of the act terrified her. The flowers and

trees were so silent, Larry jabbing weeds with an occasional chuckle so weird. It was like being in the wood alone after the darkness had fallen. A panic seized her. Her pride slipped off. She caught her letters and her skirts and fled to the house.

"I'm not mad," she gasped, with a laugh, in reply to Grandmother Devereux's scandalised stare. "I don't know how it was, but suddenly I seemed to be alone in the dark. I've always been afraid of the darkness."

"I've never known you to be afraid of anything." Mrs. Devereux looked uneasily around her.

"There's no one to see," Jill assured her. "The others are bound up heart and soul in their rheumatism, and Larry's imbecile."

"Jill, kindly sit down."

"Jerry will have a time of it, and so will Nell, when the reaction sets in. Would you care to read the letter? It's more truthful even than the one to Fred."

"I doubt it."

"You'll find it is. Nell's effect is to make him perfectly transparent. It will be odd, don't you think, to be able to see right through another girl's husband?"

"I can't think that anything on earth could make you sink so low, Jill, as to listen at closed doors."

"But you may surely look through an open window?"

"You will return to a state of common decency, Jill, when you have had time to think. Do you wish me to see the letter?"

As she read, Mrs. Devereux moved away into the shadows, and her face flushed.

"It is a letter one would gladly forget," she said at last, with great dignity. "Jill, do you care enough for Jerry to burn this letter, together with all your other ships, and begin again?"

Jill started, stared, and trembled.

"Give it to me," she said. "I can't burn it. I can't begin again. One must go on and wait. Grandmother Devereux, you forget——"

"I forget nothing, least of all what true love is. This love is false, and I see universal destruction in your path."

"I see nothing but darkness."

"Your sight will soon right itself. Jill, Jerry would never have satisfied you."

"He'd have satisfied me so long as I was with him. He had all the things in him that one wants. Even you can't guess what Jerry and I together would have been like. There's lots of greatness in Jerry."

"One weak spot will riddle out bushels of greatness; and you were never made to caulk an unseaworthy vessel."

"The vessel didn't make itself. I know where every weak spot in Jerry is; but if I were with him, no other person should ever find out. Now no one will ever even suspect what Jerry might have been. They'll grow used to him feeding Nell with gruel and oozing gold. Grandmother Devereux, think of growing hot every time we look at Jerry swelling out into a company promoter, with diamond studs and a silk hat, puffing out his chest and ravaging widows and orphans."

"Control yourself, Jill. This exaggerated tone is unlike you."

"It's unlike the part of me you know. Besides, if you sift it out, it isn't exaggerated. It's gospel truth. I didn't waste all my time in London. The strongest tire in time of making love; then they delight in helping you. I've found out heaps. The City is one big, surging, magnificent gambling hell. You get delirious there, playing about with fortunes. That's where Jerry will fly to as an antidote to Nell. Oh, don't I know? Politics won't be in it with Nell about. Jerry will need a far more brutal antidote to the poor little creature than plodding politics. And with a wisp of weeping affection at his heels Jerry may lose his head, and—goodness only knows! And you'd have been so proud of us—of Jerry and me—grandmother."

"I wish to the Lord, Jill," said Mrs. Devereux—"I wish you had loved a good man."

"Grandmother!" Jill's voice was extraordinarily soft and

tender. "Grandfather Nat wasn't a good man. He drank and he swore and he gambled. He was a man with a hundred flaws, and not half Jerry's possibilities, and yet you loved him. Oh, how you loved him! And you're the one single person in the whole world who can understand why I care for Jerry in just the way I do."

Mrs. Devereux had bent forward a little before Jill's shattering directness. Now she raised herself.

"I love as a woman; you love as a tiger. You condone nothing; your love is a consuming fire."

"My love is a fire, then, if you like, that burns up all the dross of the people I love, and gives back pure metal."

"Supposing you use it upon yourself?"

Jill caught her breath hard.

"You can't. It's only the love of some one else that can do that for you."

"Or the love of God."

Jill waved her strong, slender little hand as though in pain.

"Ah, I know nothing of that. But we're not so very different, you and I," she broke suddenly into the silence. "You're a woman first and a tiger afterwards. I'm a tiger first, and a woman afterwards. You've only got to shuffle the tiger, that's all."

"Your abounding conceit!" muttered the old woman. "Your presumptuous belief in your power over a man who has seen life as we can never hope to see it! Have you no humility?"

"Ah, well, Nell's as humble as a trapped rabbit."

"Does it not sometimes strike you that you might have helped Jerry in the wrong way?"

"Not now. It did once. It made me sick with humility for a week. It could never happen again."

"This lawlessness! This insubordination! This glorified vanity! This apotheosis of egoism! What will be the end of it?" exclaimed Mrs. Devereux vehemently.

"I wonder," said Jill, beating her lips softly with her fingers.

"There's been many a Devereux before this who's panted to

dazzle the world, and has ended in being dazzled himself into outer darkness."

"Perhaps," said Jill, her eyes blazing—"perhaps it takes two Devereuxs to snatch fire from heaven."

"Jill! Jill! Jill! what can I say, what can I do to help or to restrain you? Oh, child, go to your room."

CHAPTER XXI

In that soft western island, a wood between the garden and the east wind, the flowers bloomed bravely up to Christmas-tide, and in mild winters the autumn violets blossomed on quietly in their warm nooks until their spring sisters came out to curtsey them off the field, and nothing but a black frost ever kept the great fuchsia trees from breaking into a riot of red buds, or hindered the myrtles from throwing out white stars. Month in, month out, one side of the old house was always pink with roses, and green peas and scarlet runners were picked every recurring year upon incredible dates.

Thus Jill had found abundance of active outdoor employment until one day in December, when the soft grey sea-mist turned of a sudden bitter cold and little needles of ice pricked at her cheek as she struggled up from the beach in the teeth of the wind. After two days' weeping protest against the rude invasion, the soft sweet west wind had flown sobbing across the purple waters, and the north had come blustering in, a great dole of snow in his lusty arms. By Christmas Eve the whole island lay deep in a white shroud. Even the graves, muffled up formless in a long white billow, lost their significance as a landmark. There was now nothing to do but to pad through the falling snow and long for the relief of Fred's arrival.

Jill had been down to the beach to watch for a fishing-boat in which he generally came across, and had missed the bi-weekly steamer and a telegraph boy with the news that Fred, in consequence of the sudden illness of his uncle, had been obliged to go back from Dublin. The wily peer could always

time his illnesses to his needs, and upon religious and commercial grounds he gravely objected to Jill. Until that moment Jill had not known the immense and increasing importance of Fred in her social scheme, nor the hopelessness of honest effort in squaring the circle. She felt as restless and purposeless as though she had been dawdling round in sentimental abstraction instead of digging her groans philosophically into the stolid earth side by side with celery plants and spring cabbages.

"So much for the patient ass pose and virtue," said Jill to herself, when they had settled down for the long evening, she and Mrs. Devereux—that lady to knit and think of a farm, the best on the island, thrown suddenly upon her hands, and, remembering Jill, in spasms, to break out into cheerful plans for the spring.

These Jill received in passive politeness, and for some time made no special comment upon anything. In the intervals of silence she wrestled conscientiously with an ancient treatise upon budding plants. Jill liked to understand what she undertook to the "last article." It was a dismal book, however, full of musty hair-splittings.

The wind wailed and lamented, a straggling japonica branch, escaped from the trellis, beat at the window. The old dog before the fire woke up now and then, groaning with the incurable ear-ache of old age; the ancient oaken clock ticked with monotonous melody; a cat of less certain date purred wheezingly.

Presently the two old servants limped in to wish their customary "good-nights," and, according to immemorial usage, quench the wax candles and carry off the silver candelabra for safe keeping to their room—a vain custom upon this innocent soil, where no burglar had ever found a foothold, and no man, woman, or child would have it in his heart to steal aught but his yearly dole of rent or a faggot of wood for the chimney. But the safe-guarding of the candlesticks had been the custom in that household for many generations, and had seemingly got into the air of Knockeen.

When the nightly semi-darkness fell upon the room, Mrs. Devereux felt herself privileged to put away questions of rent and her bounden duty to Jill, and the image of Nat would invariably slip in to fill the void.

To rest after a toilsome day beside a warm hearth was a hushed and solemn state befitting her day and generation. Directly sordid necessity therefore loosened its grasp upon her Mrs. Devereux would swim off into higher airs, wherein a great peace reigned. While they lasted she enjoyed these flights immensely. They brought her back her youth softly, unsoiled by vain and carking regret for dear lost years, which in the searching light of day so often spoils the memory of youth for the intelligent aged. Indeed, the next day, over the disciplinary pork-tub, Mrs. Devereux was generally quite ready to chasten her vagrant spirit, and impute these formless and heavenly visions to the ravagings of senile decay. And yet no sooner were the candelabra again removed than she was only too thankful to fall back upon slackness.

But the evenings made Jill ache with weariness. The roots of the earth seemed to stretch themselves out into clammy octopus arms and hold her. The petty sensation of being entrapped in a net of carrots annoyed Jill. Gladly would she have thought high under any circumstances. That she was unable to do so was a humiliation.

"If I live amongst carrots I must think carrots," said Jill, when the spiritual silence had grown altogether beyond bearing. "Now *you* never grovel in thought. This minute you're being at home on heights that would make me giddy. It must be nice to feel familiar in high places. It's your strong sense of religion that does it," said she, sitting up alertly. "I wonder how you got it."

"I got it, Jill, through much tribulation."

"Ah, I knew that. It could never have come comfortably; you're too like me. I should like a strong sense of religion too, it—it makes—you well-bred; but I should like to be happy as well. I wonder how one could manage to secure both blessings. Perhaps tribulation acts differently on

different people. The coming of Nell never gave me the ghost of a sense of religion."

"Move a little out of the flame-light, Jill. We'll have you going up the chimney next. You look more elf than human."

"I'm afraid I'm more human than elf, else I'd be quite happy amongst vegetable produce. Elfs have an affinity for the soil." Jill looked out composedly from between her joined palms. "Why should one fairly hate the simple accessories of a rural life—carrots, for example?"

"Ah, my dear Jill, speak sense. After sixty the imagination does not carry far—one craves for sanity."

"But it does seem curious to hate them in the unswerving way one does the devil, or people who don't agree with you."

"Have you no sympathy for anything?" said Mrs. Devereux temperately. "There are living creatures——"

"So many of them crawl!"

"There are many subjects for thought. It seems unprofitable to confine yourself to carrots and crawling things."

"They are just one degree better than yourself."

"Ah, there I agree with you."

"You can't get on without some one to think round. Then you can soar as high as you like. But with Nell hanging on to Jerry—— You see I do curb my ungoverned inclinations. As for Fred, it makes you hopeless to think long of him; it reduces you to a premature state of Nirvana."

"It makes my blood run cold to hear you, with an elf's heart, talk of Fred, who has the heart of a giant."

"Oh, it's vast, I know."

"Whatever it may be, it's not been made to be pulled about by modern tweezers. Stick to carrots."

"I've tried, I've striven, and I can't. One gets a longing for human beings. I rather hope it won't be Fred," she pursued vaguely. "He'd have an awful time of it, and so should I. I'm not so well prepared. Fred will always have himself and unwinking virtue to fall back on."

Jill's pagan eyes sparkled in the gloom. It was too dark to see the trembling of her red lips.

Mrs. Devereux craned and peered.

"Jill, leave Fred alone. Has he ever said he loved you?"

"Gracious me, no! I wasn't thinking of love. I was thinking of fate."

"Jill," said Mrs. Devereux presently, in a gentle voice, "try to be patient, dear. I find that we can easily manage May and June in London, and at twenty everything looks different in the spring. I don't blame you. You were made for noise, never for silence."

"I do like noise," Jill said after a long pause. "Silence wants—a sense of religion. But I don't mean to devour your substance with riotous living in order to cure love."

"I have already made my arrangements, Jill," said her grandmother haughtily. "I see no reason to alter them."

"You will when we've had it out. You've never been unreasonable yet. Do you know that for years we all thought you a miser?—all of us but Fred; he knew. Fred never makes mistakes. So you see——" She broke off hastily. "I shall leave carrots, I think, and practise domestic virtues for a change."

Mrs. Devereux sat stiff and unresponsive.

"I've done the garden well?" Jill inquired abruptly.

"You've done it admirably."

"I shall do the domestic virtues admirably, too. Just wait and see."

CHAPTER XXII

JILL practised domestic virtues at such a rate that by the time Fred came she could find a new appreciation for any virtue, however remote and dull, so long as it was entirely unconnected with the feminine hearthstone.

Everything she did, however, she did well, and took not the slightest interest in any labour except in so far as to take care that her part therein should be perfect, and all concerned in its execution obey her to the letter.

For two days her effect upon Fred was to strike him dumb and make him continually feel his limbs. She threw him back upon his original ungainliness, and sent him off into quiet corners to look at her, and sort her out. He was patient in his methods, thorough in his investigation, and few things escaped him. So directly he found out that he had been observing the antics of an intellect pure and simple, he felt more effective, and ventured back into the open.

He distrusted the ravages of pure intellect upon the feminine constitution, and felt that presently something must surely happen, and his turn come. Where Jill was concerned, it was all a matter of waiting. It ended always in her wanting him. It was, nevertheless, difficult to observe with rigid equanimity a girl who could regard a bank of primroses as she might a chemical experiment; could stand under a scented pink cloud of apple-blossoms unmoved by any other consideration than that of the autumn crop; could live through the sweet throbbing stress of a long spring day and not once redden or grow white, save indeed by dint of sheer physical exertion.

How much of this was due to Jerry Fred would have given much to know. He would also gladly have ascertained how much of Jill's attitude represented love and how much pride. But this was a Holy of Holies matter, to be approached with one's shoes off. Fred confined himself to finding things out about Jill in her character of practical gardener.

Minutes, hours, days went on, however, and yet nothing happened, except perhaps that Jill grew more surprising.

The very insolence of her indifference seemed even to protect her nose from freckles. She was above the vagaries of any spring sun!

Presently Fred's natural sense of infinitely humble superiority over so one-sided a girl decided him, in the prevailing inaction of nature, to act himself—to make things happen, in short; to put his fate in the balance and make a last bid to induce Jill to regard a primrose as a girl should.

The clouds, the flowers, the dews, the very buds and roots

were all waiting on tip-toe to see the best of Jill. The spring was going, going. But Jill held them all in the hollow of her hand, and mocked!

Fred was waiting for his life, and he had been waiting now so many years without hope, that the little faint spark at last aquick within him gathered up all the strength of the barren lost years, and spread like a flame. He would no longer wait vainly upon climatic and emotional influences.

The conquest of Jill seemed so great and noble an undertaking that he grew bold at a bound, and had no fear but of his own worthlessness. Even now this fact could bow him to the ground, but merely to think of Jill lifted him again to heaven.

He was too proud and stiff to trip up Jill in the betraying twilight; so he went to her in the full sun.

She was standing bare-headed under an apple-tree; and as he came up Jill had the wit to see that here was a man "by the grace of God."

Jill liked fine possessions, and her cold heart failed her for fear.

"So far as I know," said Fred at last, out of the scented silence, "I must have loved you ever since I was born, so it's no use jabbering. You must know."

Jill said nothing for a minute. It seemed curious to be so shocked, after all. She pulled down a flowering twig and bent it against her chin. The blossom was no whiter than her chin, no rosier than her cheek, yet there was no coquetry in her action. Well indeed for Fred if there had been! She felt quite cool and definite, and thought of all the other men who had flushed and faltered in her presence. They had all either annoyed or amused her, or else made her feel a little guilty. But she was suddenly so proud of having made this great Fred flush that she flushed herself for sympathy.

Fred seized upon the symptom, and with a swift stir of emotion sprang to her, and clasped her hands.

"Oh, Jill, I knew you didn't want words. Can you care—ever so little?"

She ignored his question.

"I think I did want words. I have only suspected just lately. Fred, have you been caring really, properly, for long, or is it your habit of standing in the breach?"

Her eyes scanned him shrewdly.

"I never remember any moment when I haven't loved you."

He tightened his hold on her hands; she struggled to get them back.

"Why didn't you look or speak intelligibly, then? Why did you blot yourself out in this, as in everything else? Fred, you've always known I like actions. Besides, I've been told you can't hide love. It lights up a man like a lamp."

"You know it was impossible——"

"You were as dark as a dungeon until you woke up a year ago to bully Grandmother Devereux. How could one tell? Did you suffer torments?"

"It was pretty bad sometimes—that sort of thing is."

"Your virtue is maddening. Any other human man would have bubbled over."

"He couldn't very well, when there was Jerry."

"I think you know more about logic than love."

"Besides, one doesn't bubble over to no purpose."

"That's satanic pride, not love."

"No one but a proud man could love you properly. Jill, can you love me?"

"You might have given me an idea. To let Jerry absorb every atom of me! And now Nell has the benefit of my fragments! Oh, well, it's all very well to quench yourself in other things; but when a girl comes in, it's not fair. It's not fair to the girl."

"You must have guessed, you must have known."

"I had no time for guessing. And I hate humility. Why didn't you fight it out, instead of effacing yourself? I like battles. And I can't help it—I can't help it; it's savage, it's exploded tradition; it's low—but, Fred, I like being fought for. You always make me tell the truth," she said, with passionate resentment

"It wouldn't have been honourable."

"It would have been something I could understand."

"Oh, Jill, what can one say to you? Surely, surely, you knew."

"Oh, you were ready enough to oblige. You were a father to us all, from Grandmother Devereux downwards. You were a rock of defence, and a shield, and a buckler, all rolled into one. A man should be able to demonstrate the difference between love and devotion to his aged grandmother. Fred, you've not been fair to me; you've not been fair to yourself. You slurred over yourself. If I had been a fool, I might sometimes have actually despised you. As it is, you let Jerry carry off all the best of me."

Of a sudden she dropped down, leant up against the old grey tree, and for the first time in her life she cried as if her heart would break.

"Oh, don't—don't say anything, and, for goodness' sake, don't do anything! I'll—I'll stop directly. It's only—it's only that Jerry's taken so much of me that I can't get it back, and I should like to have given it to you—at least," she said, lifting up her face, the tears raining down her cheeks, "I'd rather give it to you than to any one else."

"Oh, Jill, you haven't lost anything really, dear, but your courage."

She stood up again, her eyes wet, but her pride restored.

"Courage? No; I have heaps of courage. Any fool can have courage. I've lost better things than that."

"We'll get them back together."

"There's such a heap of me as there is. You'll never want the half of it. It would swamp you, and I know I'll not be able to bottle it up. Jerry and his affairs would have absorbed it all like a sponge. Why, he was equal to the entire family."

"I'm more receptive than you think. I'm equal to any amount of you. Think how long I've been wanting it. Jill, the very thought of you makes one big. There's plenty of room."

"Fred, it's no use. Don't begin to promise. It's not in

you. You couldn't stray or make a false step. In the ordinary course of things you'll never want me except for politeness. I'll be an unearned increment, and I can't work myself off in ordinary industries. Gardening is a dead failure from a higher point of view. The carrots did well, but as instruments of grace! Ask grandmother—and I have no taste for religions."

"Jill, you can care a little. I know you can."

"Then *I* wish *I* knew."

"Not care like me, of course. But then I began so young."

"I want to care. Fred, you don't know how lonely I am sometimes. I care for nothing in the world except for not caring."

"Jill, I think that's the beginning of love."

"It's not the least like love. As if I didn't know what love was! It makes you think beautifully; it makes you good. Last year this very apple-tree could fairly inspire me. I never said so to Jerry. We had so many other things to talk about. But I believe you'd quite revel in that sort of thing.

"We'll bring them back."

"I rather doubt it, Fred. Used you to be wanting to kiss me all these years?"

"Oh, Jill!" he said reproachfully. "And you say you know what love is." His great shoulders shook a little.

"I do. Love hardens the heart," said Jill.

She lifted her face, alive with wistful mockery, and when Fred kissed her on the red mouth, she gave one little uncontrollable sob. But the next minute she laughed and put her hands behind her back like a boy.

"The whole thing is so second-rate. It shows such a feeble moral constitution, not to be able to recover from a blighted attachment. We're led to suppose that these things help to till fallow soil. By right Jerry should have prepared me for you, like a sort of modern John the Baptist." She narrowed her eyes to look at Fred. "And really, I'm taking a step higher from every point of view. I wish I could appreciate my privileges. What's that about *l'appétit vient en mangeant*?"

"Don't, Jill."

Fred shivered. Bad taste—and in Jill!

"Fred, you've stood the broadsides of my innermost emotions all these years. You're not going to fail me now, just because we're engaged? If that's the case the sooner we get disengaged the better. Come, anyway, and tell Grandmother Devereux."

"Come first to the woods."

"No; we'll want the woods afterwards to recover. She'll take it hardly. She doesn't think me worthy. She'll glare and make pointed remarks, then she'll go to her room, and after a hard fight she'll pray for you—not for me, mind. She has always to fight now before she can pray."

"How can you possibly tell?"

"Our first inclination is always to fight. We're elemental creatures. Grandmother I'm not sure that we mightn't have shone amidst great events—blood and groans and slaughter. At any rate, most certainly we'd have blazed."

"You may still have that opportunity. Character can do much."

"My character will be entirely occupied in playing second fiddle to yours. If you'd been a hunted Royalist, now, or been struck down by paralysis in the flower of your youth, or been a Devereux in short, or any other interesting variety of lame dog, I believe I might rise to the occasion. You—you're so fatally prosperous," she sighed, "body, soul, and estate."

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you in the matter of picturesque affliction. But except by force of contrast we'll be genteel paupers."

"Your uncle won't by any chance cut you off with a penny for this folly?"

"I can't conscientiously buoy you up with any such hope."

"And your ridiculous spiritual pride won't permit of your being lifted into high places by feminine blandishments. I could do that," said Jill, her eyes dancing.

"When you cooled down, you'd despise yourself."

"If you were even a fool, I could write your speeches."

"Every man in the street would spot them."

"Fred, can't you see that's simply saying that I'm a fool? You can't appreciate me, even. You're too fine and delicate. You don't know in the least of what I'm capable, and you'll never find out. You'll never sufficiently tax my resources. My faculties drop off and wither for want of use. Some day I'll be a simpering countess with a parochial mind, throwing diffident glances through a long-armed glass at you vanishing up to heaven."

"Are we to grow apart then, not together?"

His kind, faithful eyes rested upon her softly.

"Yes, until you begin to appreciate my faults, not idealise them. Ah, there's Grandmother Devereux coming down from the graves. That's a bad omen."

"No, it's a good one. She's been laying white flowers on the graves."

"Fred, you're a stack of romance. *You* tell her."

"No," said Fred grimly; "you're more in the mood."

"Look! She knows. She's buckling on her armour. Oh dear me!"

"Jill," said the lady, "you've got more than either you desire or deserve, or can understand. One can only pray that the grace of God may lead you aright. There's one comfort: when you let your instincts alone they're frequently accurate. With one grain of sense, you'll be a happy woman, but I doubt if you've got it," said she, with a solemn glance.

"And Fred?" inquired Jill softly.

"Fred has undertaken a difficult task, but I have the utmost confidence in him." Mrs. Devereux glanced at Jill's moist eyes, at her mouth, mocking and sweet, and paused. And in spite of her reason, she added slowly, with a regal smile, "I think I can almost understand his temerity. Get tea for yourselves, children; I have one or two things to see to before I can join you."

"She proposes to include me in those prayers," said Jill

reflectively; "which means that she has her doubts of you in some point. I wonder what it is precisely. It must be quite pleasant to be thought human by some one."

"Neither of us, if you notice, said a word in reply to her congratulations."

"Now, that's just like her. She strips every vestige of grace from off your manners. Fred, your face is shining like Stephen, the Apostle's. Never in all my life have I seen you like this before."

"I never had cause till now."

She laughed, stamped, and flushed.

"It's such a waste of spirituality! It's an injustice to me. I'm not used to angel's food. I feel somehow out of place. We'll go to the woods and talk politics."

CHAPTER XXIII

NELL'S convalescence was long and painful. She was a shy and fearful creature, loth to presume too far even upon life; she had cogent reasons, moreover, to draw her towards death. If perforce she laid hold one day upon a little wisp of life, the next some unconsidered glance from Jerry would loosen her grasp upon it. She trembled back and forth in pitiful indecision, and in the end it was her meek habit of obedience that saved her.

Sustained throughout the trying ordeal by natural kindness and a soothing undercurrent of the martyr spirit, Jerry did great things in the matter of duty, but when Nell's eyes closed and he could rest, his thoughts flew off to Jill.

But Nell loved him wholly, so nothing escaped her, least of all these moments of relaxation. Directly she beheld him in this mood, she drifted patiently back into the shadows.

In time Jerry found her out, roused himself to a supreme and continuous effort, and commanded the docile creature

back to health. And Nell, unused to resist any masculine force firmly applied, put away her tremors and got well. Whereupon Jerry, having come to the end of everything, went back to the office, and fell inertly into mathematical details. He found them a relief, a change in monotony requiring no output either in intelligence or conscience.

Jabez had obligingly given up his house to the young couple, and established himself in a cottage on the grounds to take observations upon them. Nell now off his mind, he was anxious to put a right value upon Nell's prize in this, his latest transaction. Throughout the affair he had discounted fairly the sentiment inevitably woven in with it, and had felt with regret that he had paid somewhat dearly for untitled blood, and Irish at that. But Nell was his sole weakness, and the strongest must relax at some one point. Moreover, one can exploit and develope even an unpromising business, and any man worth his salt can get over an early check to a promising one. Jabez had no notion of Fitzgerald Perrsse Devereux, the founder of Nell's family, being a failure. He must return a fair interest in kind, if not in coin. Jabez liked honest value for honest money, and always got it. He let the mathematical phase pass. After six weeks' broken rest any man would want an anodyne, and figures were safer than pegs. But when he found Jerry furtively stifling sighs at sound of Nell's soft step on the verandah, he thought it full time to demonstrate to his young friend's stunned mind some of the advantages accruing, by divine right, to the son-in-law of a millionaire.

When he had ascertained that the shareholders would be fairly dealt by, and his honour, such as it was, saved, Jerry had ceased to feel any more interest in Jabez's millions than a sportsman might in a larder glutted with bought game. And if millions had lost their savour, so also had most other things. Formerly Jerry had but to close his eyes to behold himself upon a choice of pinnacles, with Jill radiant beside him. With Nell for company no pinnacle seemed to be worth the scaling. The level would serve well enough for any purpose. Jerry, indeed, felt already a little old for mountain climbing. He

could sit down comfortably for the rest of his days in the shelter and grow fat. To behave decently to Nell seemed to be the one thing needful, and her slight tendrils stretched no further than to him. They required no breezy seats upon high places. The sharp airs of the hills would have shrivelled them up. Those nipping airs, moreover, reminded him of things. It were best to avoid being reminded—to steer clear of interruptions.

As for the fever of speculation it was dried with the other things in Jerry's veins.

Upon this count Jabez felt but little uneasiness. He had a wide and intimate acquaintance with that portion of the British public that has once got the taste of gold upon its receptive palate. It is a thing which clings close, and calls for more than love to dislodge it. The fever was but checked, and would reappear in due time.

The total extinction of the minor ambitions, however, meant social extinction for Nell, and must be attended to. And Jabez had a sound biblical objection to hidden talents. No blooming bushels for any son-in-law of his, he would reflect, as he smoked on his verandah. To shine openly, and justify himself as an investment before the eyes of the world, was what the fellow had got to do.

The world, to Jabez, meant London. It was the only capital of whose geographical or commercial bearings he had any knowledge. The others he judged according to the quality of their hotels.

Jabez screwed up his little pink eyes with the true sartorial gaze, directed them upon Nell's husband, and decided that Fitzgerald possessed every requisite for future greatness—as he accounted greatness. He made a few laboured rings of smoke, and hemmed deprecatingly. In spite of his cooler judgment, the unobtrusive indifference to his presence apparent in the mien of his Investment interfered with the ease of Mr. Simkins.

"Fitzgerald," he said at last blandly, "there's a waste of ability in this here mine. We must spread ourselves."

"Oh, well, Africa's big enough."

"Africa!" sneered this pioneer. "All you've got to do in Africa is to sit tight on anything that'll hold you, and shut your mouth. It don't take two to do that. You're cramped here, my boy. What you want is space and a free hand."

"I'm not thinking, just at present, of floating any fraudulent companies."

"Come now, if I said that——"

"You'd never say it, my dear sir; your sense of refinement is far too acute."

Jabez blinked patiently.

"If a man has the gift of the gab, and can use it, it ain't here he'd care to practise it. Nothing puts off polite eloquence like a nest of anointed liars. You can't get no weigh on 'em. It's like working a dead horse. As for blue blood, Lord, the place fairly swims in it; it's dirt cheap—for a young man as likes appreciation, an' has the gift, *an'* the money, London is the sphere. I tell you the desert ain't in it for the single-eye business and a hereditary conscience. I'll tackle the desert, you take London, and the partnership is fair."

"You think it time, then, that Nell was presented?"

"I think myself," said Jabez, with grotesque dignity, "that my daughter is quite ready for every detail of her position."

Jerry sat up abruptly.

"So do I. I say, Jabez, I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to put it like that."

"Well, now, of course you didn't," Jabez drawled oilily, now quite at his ease. "A bit off colour; a sea voyage'll set you up. Arter three weeks of the sea you'll be slick back into old habits, an' able to put things right with your eyes shut," said Jabez, leering.

To preserve himself from murder, Jerry shook himself up and went off for a walk.

Jabez sniggered, went to a locked cupboard, and got himself out a nip of gin. After any neat transaction Jabez invariably sprang back to the dearest memory of his youth.

Nell and the pungent aroma of the best schnapps made two little green oases in the metallic waste of Jabez's arid heart. He had now fairly started Fitzgerald into action, and the fellow would come in a winner in time. Moreover, his own hand, with Jerry safe planted would be as free as air.

Jabez, even though he should never be found out, preferred honest dealings to dishonest. They were more in accordance with his dim recollections of his religious principles. Besides, with an intimate knowledge of the less stern conviction of your neighbours, they gave you a hold over a good deal of marketable blue blood, and contributed to the acquisition of a "presence," a mature commercial grace pathetically desired of Mr. Simkins. Above all things, honesty matched well with Nell. At the same time, Jabez liked to be honest in his own way, not to be schooled in the virtue by a half-fledged Irishman, whose high tone had failed to save either his head or his acres. While the young fool was learning discretion in London he could be using his in South Africa.

Meanwhile, Jerry was out on the great veldt that swept up around the fine mansion of Jabez, and the little withered buds of hope were softening and swelling in his barren heart. His languid limbs seemed suddenly to gather strength in the brilliant air, he struck out swiftly towards the gorgeous west, that now again, as his numbness of eye and heart and brain fell from off him, hid all the throbbing mighty mysteries of the Greater Life. The old maddening desire to shake off the shackles of his bondage and get home seized upon Jerry. He threw up his head and sniffed the bright air, which excited him like wine. He looked across the boundless reach of plain, radiant with a thousand flowers; at the vast ridges wrapped in loveliest veils of luminous blue; at the golden mimosa, trembling in the soft breeze; at the roof-trees of the city of wood, where he and Jabez reigned kings, which lived, and moved, and had a being at their pleasure and for them alone, which had arisen with them, and would as surely fall. And all

this was but the crude beginning, the stepping-stone towards home.

Jerry's eyes shone with unshed tears. The divine longing of the exile, the vast unutterable, impelling sadness that rends the heart, and has made Imperial England, was upon him. He had earned his right to the great Home, he was ready to prove his mettle in its mighty affairs. With the strong, hot tears of youth in his eyes, Jerry stood up to his full height. He was just for one little moment the Jerry of Jill's dreams, a noble boy, full of valour.

And then every atom of him swept back to tremulous Nell. He turned his back upon the gold of the west, and strolled home, head down, his eyes upon the ground,—through the falling darkness.

The thought of Nell had brought his soaring soul to heel, the world was stripped of its splendour, his powers shrank and waned; no longer could he shake the world and touch heaven. He was a married man, with the usual faint light of hope to cheer his helplessness. For the first time in his life he fell back comfortably upon the pillowy comfort of a settled income, and in the same moment accepted mediocrity. Jerry was never made to stand up to his full height alone.

But he went home to Nell and was gentle and kind. He took her for a little walk, and showed her the young horn of the moon in a vast green sky.

It was the beginning of new things also for Jill, for she had been married that morning to Fred, under the strict censorship of Lawrence Devereux and the piously disapproving eye of Lord Kendrick.

CHAPTER XXIV

As a lover Fred had been unsatisfactory. There was too much repressed devotion about him for Jill's taste. As a husband

he threatened to become a millstone about her neck. As a matter of fact, the brilliant rush of wooing and marriage had left Fred, used to grave and quiet plodding ways, rather dazed and giddy. He felt flat, and there was no denying it; sometimes he looked it.

Having surrounded his young wife with all the things in which her heart delighted, and launched her upon her shining course, he was thankful to get back to his own sedate pace in order to recover a little, and think over the infinite fulness of his content. Fred was a miser in regard to his inestimable treasure, and liked to gloat over it in secret. And being a slow creature, he needed time to get used to happiness and reorganise his scheme of life. For in truth there were other things besides matrimony and its bewildering joys to be considered. The matter held complications. In addition to himself he had now Jill to satisfy, and there were difficulties in the way.

As to the ultimates, he felt a humble confidence; Jill could scarce be more exacting than he himself was. It was the road to the ultimates that troubled Fred. His slow and uneventful methods in reaching any goal could but weary to death so vivid a spirit as Jill's. Do what he would, he must always be but a dull and undistinguished object for Jill to watch. She would be a swallow always wheeling around an old crow, a spy to point the way to the Promised Land.

This was Fred's one grief. Gladly would he have brought exhilarating drama into every action for Jill's sake, informed each slow and toilful step with wit and laughter, to lighten the road for his brilliant judge; but although in his magnificent confidence in her he was ready and willing to accept Jill's final verdict upon all his actions, never could he keep in step with the ways of her going. She was altogether too sudden and swift for him.

In any case, uninterrupted feminine companionship in his laborious hours could only have appalled and benumbed Fred. He would have been at a loss what to do with it, or how to bestow it.

He had got into a dull methodical habit of pigeon-holing, so to speak, the various factors in his schemes. There was no pigeon-hole known to him that could be fitted to Jill's needs, possibly that could hold her. He was too clumsy to learn the uses of new forces; besides, his hands were already over-full of old ones. He had, moreover, rigid notions in regard to the sacredness of wives, while the value of hedged-in enclosures for women ran strong in his blood.

The work he was now chiefly engaged in was no place for women. His uncle had lately made over to him the charge of the bodies of certain hordes appertaining to the estate, far down on the Surrey side. The right to experiment upon the souls of those persons Lord Kendrick reserved rigorously to himself. He made bi-monthly raids upon the blighted starved-out organs, carrying on the good work by proxy, prayer, tracts, and war to the knife with the local Church Militant. Fred's portion in the business was therefore naturally full of weird complications, needed close attention, and much of his time.

The region he was called upon to re-organise was one of overcrowding and crime, aggravated by an oily hypocrisy more appalling than either. In that sordid land was there no short cut to anything, no springing up of any height for the most agile. As for Fred, he would have to crawl doggedly, hope unflinchingly, and expect but little.

Under no circumstances would the locality suit Jill, still less would Jill suit it? She was more ignorant, if possible, than himself, and less patient. She had never suffered in the way he had done. She had had no training in sordid patience. He knew too well what such training meant, and had no mind to subject her to it.

Jill was a trust as sacred as it was brilliant, not to be tampered with. Not for him to dash such glancing gaiety as hers, to load such burnished wings with lead! Just at present to shine was the divine right of Jill; she shone incomparably, and she loved shining. Such stolid, stubborn,

catapultic forces as were pushing him on could only crush the light out of a star.

Upon this Fred's prosaic practicality swamped sentiment; an untoward sheen, he decided firmly, can only serve to bewilder a man upon a dim road. Upon many a count Jill was therefore better out of it.

Jill's time should come. One day he meant to satisfy her. His trust in her must surely make him invincible. But meanwhile, when not actively engaged in shining, most of all he dreaded the dulness for the child. That no bright woman can live in the future as a dull man may was one of the articles of Fred's belief, also that to woman waiting is abhorrent.

Fred felt himself to be inadequate in many points. His minor occupations even were so devastatingly colourless, as inevitably to shut Jill out.

She had once said that he was a born usher. There was truth in the taunt. If a fellow really wanted help, he could never resist the temptation of giving it to him. He had a gift that way. He felt guiltily that it must always be sheer joy to him to be driving knowledge even into a wooden-headed clam.

The fatal facility made him very sorry for Jill. It proved him to be fundamentally so dull a fellow. The thought of his drab tastes and propensities set against the engaging glamour of Jerry drove him one evening out on a sorrowful prowl.

If Jill wanted anything reasonable it seemed so hard to deny it to her.

Amongst Fred's grave affections there lurked, however, some pride, and in certain details he was peculiarly English. He was generally obligingly ready to sacrifice grace to stability. Restored by fresh air and exercise, with lifted head he now decided that in spite of all Jerry's natural advantages and his own defects no power on earth would induce him to shift characters with Jerry.

"And thank goodness," he concluded, cheering up, "Jill

is going to let me off dancing. I couldn't have stood much more of that."

Whereupon he tramped home to coach a youth of his acquaintance possessed of an insatiable hankering after the blood of our sovereign lady's enemies together with an insurmountable difficulty in acquiring the necessary intellectual means for the shedding of it—a gallant and engaging youth pronounced hopeless by three crammers.

Jill had dined in her room that evening in order to join an early theatre party.

With Jerry and his own shortcomings on his mind and without Jill to remind him, Fred had wholly forgotten to dine, had forgotten likewise that Jill was to call for him at ten o'clock to bear him off to an important house which she and his uncle had, for once, agreed in deciding to be indispensable to his development.

Fred was so pleased to see the two, for a wonder, of one mind upon any subject, that he was only too anxious to oblige.

When, therefore, Jill found him at half-past ten driving the nature and object of a rider into the puzzled brain of a boy, although she laughed merrily, and, while Fred dressed, made active and amused onslaughts upon the boy's heart, yet was she somewhat drearily confirmed in her morning's estimate of her excellent husband.

To neglect her for so paltry an office! Had the excuse been big enough even to permit of a sense of martyrdom slipping in, she might at least have been proud of it. Theoretically Jill still admired Spartan virtue.

But Fred was obviously thoroughly enjoying himself, and the boy thrilled with gratitude. And all that long evening how lonely she had been!

With all Jill's crass independence her dependence was sometimes a little pathetic. To shine alone left her empty. She would, in fact, have been content not to shine at all so long as she might always be feeding some splendid flame. She could have knelt gleefully, mouth to fire, to blow, could

she only have been sure of standing out ultimately in the superb reflection of the resulting blaze. But to throw sticks upon a slumbering furnace, however powerful, sapped her strength.

Had Fred even been the restful object she had once judged him to be! Upon further trial he was anything but that. He kept her for ever busy interpreting the mainsprings of his actions, and her own interpretation of them made her invariably chuckle, the next minute feel unutterably ashamed of herself; for for no earthly reason, so soon as she began to criticise Fred, she began to feel infinitesimal in his presence. He loomed forthwith vast and unattainable above her.

With no better reason did this simple adoring man form a great irritating, magnanimous mark of interrogation in Jill's shining path. He alternately repelled and compelled her admiration, and he was always more or less exasperating. With great things about, to have no hand whatsoever in the hatching of them was a continual affliction to Jill also.

Throughout, however, Jill retained her practicality. If shining alone left her hollow, to wait for Fred to shine in company were vain, while to blink in the shadows was not for Jill. She could, therefore, but leave Fred behind, and, to console herself for the loss of him, outshine every one else. She shone so hard, indeed, that she dazzled herself and grew reckless in a way so entirely her own that so far it had mystified rather than shocked the better part of her acquaintances, and in no sort of way did it discompose Fred. It was no such trifle that could move faith like his.

There was one astute gentleman, however, who found less cause for congratulation in the unaided coruscations of Mrs. Morton; and that was Lord Kendrick. The marriage still gnawed like iron into the pious soul of this worthy gentleman. If his heir must make a fool of himself, there were plenty of paupers to be had for the asking with some sense of sound religion about them. In any case, he had a rooted objection to social comets. They were suggestive of general unsoundness and a loose wit. For this reason he kept well up to the

front in Jill's glittering train, his avenging pince-nez raking the pregnant air in search of developements.

Jill's censors would indeed appear, at this period, to be of mixed quality, for another who faithfully observed her was an old acquaintance of other type altogether to the evangelical peer. The one was suspicious by instinct, the other by experience.

The one with experience was discreet, and watched modestly from her seat amidst the matrons. She had learnt many things, and foreseen more, long before she troubled to make her presence known to the object of her regard. Mrs. de Salis (one time Mrs. Fontaine) knew by happy experience the right emotional moment for most things, and was never in any fussy haste.

At odd moments Jill would grow so intolerant of the general unsatisfactoriness of her court, and so comically lonely, that her next step was to dismiss it and recover from its effect at her leisure. She had a pretty way with her, however, and never offended, while regal aloofness was one of her most becoming attitudes.

The elder lady, her own brood bountifully provided for, had an eye for artistic values, and took the oddest interest in Jill. She paused now to look at the girl; then turned, half smiling, to glance round at her husband's keen, strong, somewhat heavy face, his grave eyes fastened upon Jill's shining head.

"Now this," she thought, "this is getting really interesting."

Just at this moment Jill looked up and saw her. Her lips parted with a half-puzzled smile. She stood up inquiringly, and suddenly her face was alight.

"Oh," she cried, "surely I remember!"

"Then I'll be extremely obliged to you if you'll forget."

With a motherliness almost naïve in one so youthful, the lady drew Jill down beside her softly.

"The rest of the world," she continued, with a gentle air of confidence, "has forgotten years ago, and indeed it never knew. As a matter of fact, there was nothing for it to know,"

she murmured modestly; "my husband died at the right moment precisely." She paused to look Jill over coolly. "We cannot, however, all expect such well-timed mercy. Chance is a capricious dame."

Jill was lost in wonder at the immaculate smoothness of the lady's face. She had a rigid memory, and thought she could surely remember a line or so. Jill was young and careless, and did not pause to reflect that what at thirty is but nature just touched with pathos, at forty, if not overcome, spells extinction. The impalpable significance in Mrs. de Salis's tone entirely escaped her.

"Where are the girls?" she inquired, in absolute innocence. The shaft had certainly not struck home.

Mrs. de Salis narrowed her eyes, but in the main she was glad. Her own colourless offspring had continued to bore her, and even in her varied and absorbing existence she had found time to think sometimes of a weird, brown, elf of a little girl growing up under the shadow of a score of family graves.

"Cœlia will be a peeress," said the proud mother, "please God, in a year or so. Alleyne's father has creeping paralysis, poor dear. He can't possibly last out much longer, and since the brain's gone—there was very little of it to go—and the time for repentance past, his worst enemy couldn't wish such an existence prolonged."

"I see," said Jill. "And Alma?"

"Ah, Alma married a vicar."

"A vicar?"

"Oh, well, it is trying always to have to explain him, poor fellow! He has private means, and the right politics. Even should he miss a bishopric, he's safe to be a dean. Six feet two, dear thing, with a chiselled face cut out for a cathedral pulpit. He has written the most beautiful commentary on the Hittites—or is it the Galatians? I am so bad at names. There's a wonderful dignity about the legs of a tall, well-covered dean, don't you think? Cœlia is quite happy."

"And Margery?"

"Margery, I regret to say, was on the brink of making a

fool of herself with a clerk in the Foreign Office; but, thank God, her religion saved her. She's now in a particularly desirable sisterhood. The order is less grasping than the usual run of them, and more exclusive. And they have an excellent French cook to make Lent endurable, and the dress is quite *chic*. It suits Margery. In ordinary clothes she looks like a maypole. I have every reason to be thankful in regard to my children. Do you know Evelyn Brooke?" she demanded, changing the subject with a soft bang.

"No. Who is she?"

Mrs. de Salis nodded her well-dressed head in the direction of a lady posed in an armchair upon the dais, two distinct periods struggling openly for mastery in her person—the neck and nose of a mediæval saint, the befringed brow of a nineteenth-century vestal virgin.

"I often find her staring at me," said Jill inquiringly.

"She has her reasons," said the other oracularly. "How old would you take her to be? Older than I am?"

"Your age would be the last thing it would ever occur to any one to think of," said Jill frankly.

"That is only as it should be," said the other, with gentle complacency. "If the age of a woman is the first thing that strikes you when you look at her, she's lost. You get quite insolently familar with Evelyn Brooke's years on sight. A most pathetic case of *qui s'excuse s'accuse*. Look at her hair, curled like a prize chrysanthemum, and with as tragically laboured an effect. Evelyn Brooke's forty-two if she's a day. She's a woman of indomitable energy. You'd better beware of her."

"I? Beware?

"The magnificent insolence of these young married women! Yes, you—you! You've probably frustrated the best-laid plan of Evelyn's maturer and more urgent life. She was always a schemer, poor dear! and yet she's shown herself capable of a dog-like—indeed, quite a bulldog-like—fidelity. Like many another virtue, it ravaged her youth for her." She paused with deliberation.

Jill's eyes shone with intelligent interest. The play of Mrs. de Salis's countenance fascinated her, and finding out about new things exhilarated Jill. What had always struck her as particularly novel in this bigger world she was now engaged in investigating was the odd want of proportion between moral cause and effect—the startling discrepancy between the beginnings and endings of the various acquaintances she had made. Truly, a lenient world which given sufficient counter-attraction, can show a generous alacrity in covering pasts and veiling presents. Any quick change upon a brilliant stage enthralled Jill. She had a hard heart, but her sense of humour was waking up.

The sweet assured airs of Mrs. de Salis, with certain of Grandmother Devereux's pungent prophecies concerning her latter end, now engaged all Jill's attention.

"The bulldog-like fidelity?" she repeated.

The brightening of her eyes could inspire eloquence; those of Mrs. de Salis threw out an answering gleam.

"Once in pre-historic times," she proceeded, "Eveleen was engaged to a man who jilted her for an heiress with a consumption. For long years Eveleen watched this poor lady with a weighing eye. No breath of scandal ever entered into the affair—Eveleen is incapable of harbouring other than virtuous instincts: has always been a Church-worker, her breast packed full of spotless snow. But she wanted to rescue Charles Cockburn from his sins—and the other woman. To give her her due, her affection for him was dauntless and genuine. And just when the sickly interloper had begun to turn the scale at twelve stone—she weighed methodically once a week, and sat down doggedly at stated intervals to devour two pounds of pork chops at a sitting—the new treatment, my dear—poor Charles could stand the exhibition no longer, so he died and upset all Eveleen's arrangements. She awoke one morning to find that she had been wasting the best years of her life upon a vain quest. Small blame to the poor thing if she felt sore and bitter and turned her back upon elusive earthly love to give wings

to the one heavenly ambition yet lurking within her denuded soul. Directly Charles was buried, she started in pursuit of Lord Kendrick. To be the wife and mother of Christian peers while yet there was time called out all Eveleen's spiritual and mundane activity. She cut her front hair, had her neck massaged—not altogether successfully, as you see—and renounced High Churchism. She was getting on very nicely until the excitement of Mr. Morton's arrival on the scene distracted the attention of Lord Kendrick. He detested the previous heir, and nothing but a congenital distrust of women prevented his confounding the knavish tricks of his descendants long ago. Eveleen's principles had almost won him to a belated temerity when Mr. Morton came on, and then you appeared! You're a formidable rival, but Eveleen's energy partakes now of the frenzy of a last stand. She'll stop at nothing." Mrs. de Salis looked dreamily at her fan. "She's already unearthed the fact of your former engagement and an odd South African tragi-comedy in which Mr. Devereux played a singular part. Do you know, by the way, that Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Devereux have arrived?"

"No," said Jill quietly, "I didn't know."

But Mrs. de Salis saw her pupils widen.

"They are staying at the Hotel Cecil until they get a house. A friend of mine travelled home with them. She's a wood anemone sort of beauty, and likely to catch on. Her health seems to be weak. He mustn't count on that, however," she said cheerfully, "after Eveleen. Bad health gives a woman a great pull over a man," she added thoughtfully. "A woman with any weak spot can always get all she wants. No man likes to feel like a brute towards a fragile bloom.—Ah, there comes a ravening partner. I really believe you're unconscious of the fact that for the last ten minutes I've been bombarded with broadsides of malignant inquiry. Give my love to Grandmother Devereux, and tell her—tell her that I've an assured position from every point of view, and won't hurt you.—You're just the girl to give Eveleen Brooke a pull over you. There's a glint of folly in all your wisdom,

and *vice versâ*, so look out. But I'm glad to see you're almost as sincere and trustworthy as you were when you strove to grind Spartan steadfastness into latter-day froth. A grave-crowned island has its advantages."

This time there was no mistaking the significance in her tone and the sudden appealing falter in her fearless eyes. Even in the dulness of her own shock Jill saw it.

At that moment Mrs. de Salis was as sincere as she was human, and Jill, aching herself with a humanity all too sincere, could not but be pitiful. In any case the secret of Mrs. de Salis would have been safe with Jill; now the very fact of it drew her to the woman oddly.

CHAPTER XXV

"THE simplicity of a great mind is the one insurmountable obstacle," said Jill next morning slowly, after a long and patient survey of her husband. "You fairly get stuck in it."

Apparently Fred did not hear her.

"How clean and unruffled and altogether right you are! You slept splendidly last night, didn't you, Fred?"

This time she took good care that he should hear her.

"Slept? Yes, of course I did—slept like a top."

"And you haven't a single qualm or misgiving about anything you undertake. You take good care to overcome the misgivings before you enter on the undertaking. Some babies are born with silver spoons in their mouths. You must have been born with a roll of red tape. I don't suppose you know it, Fred, but there's an almost indecently departmental air about you. And now you're off with your accustomed cheerful and unflinching hopelessness to burrow amongst the submerged."

Fred, although he had an appalling amount of things to attend to, perceiving that Jill was evidently suffering from want of entertainment, pulled up his straying and scattered attention and roused himself to a further effort.

"No; as it happens I'm going to burrow with very full and

sufficient hope into the oily winding of one of my uncle's representatives in religion. He's been fleecing a whole street since Christmas with a co-operative store of his own invention. We weren't absolutely sure of the facts until now."

"And now every detail of every fact is in painful, perfect order, all oiled and curled like an Assyrian bull, not a hair astray in one! If I'd been in it, I could at least have contributed the one touch of chaos that makes the whole world kin. Everything then would have become more or less interesting."

A wistful note in the delectable voice of his wife fetched up Fred's still vagrant attention.

Hitherto, besides an honest appetite, he had a budget of bewildering correspondence to hold him absorbed, for being well aware that so soon as Jill felt moved to speech words would inevitably flow, he felt no qualms in the indulgence of necessary abstractions. For assuredly, neither to herself nor to any one else did Jill permit any rioting in morbid silences, which fact, oddly enough, was an abiding consolation to her husband. To fight against silence had been amongst the nightmares of his lonely youth.

Jill, full of restless, ruthless vitality, partly physical, perhaps, and so new as to be startling her a little, was not the least hungry.

Since she could not eat, in order to subdue her untoward excitement and ward off depression, she had been spending her time in imagining miracles taking place in Fred; seeing him emerge and expand in the most unexpected and delightful directions, full of fine, sparkling, yet reasonful emotions and other desirable states of mind so far wholly undreamed of by honest Fred.

Finding him so intractably set in his own quiet methods, Jill had got into the way of carrying off her unconscious victim upon the wild wings of a rushing imagination, setting him upon some fantastic and giddy eminence, and then, in sudden terror of the throbbing humanity quickening this man she thus treated as puppet, sweeping back to earth

again, laughing softly yet somewhat abashed at her own impudence.

Jill was really rather tired, rather worn, and troubled. She had been feeling strangely adrift now for some time, and the night before, when she got home at last from her party, disturbing thoughts had kept her awake. The shock of knowing Jerry to be so close at hand had smitten deep and waked up a host of hidden griefs. The longing loyally and sincerely to get really near to Fred in everything from her own point of view, a point that differed very materially from Fred's, left her no rest. She was tired out with vain longing, and her temper had always been very far from perfect.

"A last touch may mean a great deal," said Jill, with a meaning sigh.

"So far everything I have to do has been deplorably dull," said Fred, with an anxious look at her, "unless, of course, you're regularly deep in it, and in any case it's unsatisfactory. It would bore you tremendously."

"I wonder if it would. There's a good deal to find out in most things which seem to take off their dulness. I do love digging into things."

He watched her brilliant face doubtfully.

"Your life is already so full there must be plenty of things to find out in it still. You can't possibly have exhausted all its intricacies in this short time."

A note of pained appeal rang but too clearly in Fred's manly tones, but Jill calmly waved it aside.

"Learning the private and confidential histories of all your acquaintances related by their dearest friends, and getting into the way of making epigrams of mixed quality, doesn't take all your time. I'm naturally active."

"There are so many attractive channels, dearest, for your sort of activity."

"I don't say," said Jill, striving to rival the worthy man in moderation of speech, "I don't pretend that I especially yearn to mess about amongst the poor. I've been poor myself too long thoroughly to enjoy that. Poverty's a dull dispensation.

But I want to see what's *making* you. I can see very well that you're being *made*, and I don't care to be out in the cold about it all, you see."

Fred looked dreadfully embarrassed. He had always been haunted by an unexpressed conviction that sooner or later Jill would be wanting to try experiments on him. He deeply distrusted the feminine experimental spirit as applied to himself. To serve the woman he loves faithfully, to broaden his horizon in a manner to do fitting justice to her loftiest aspirations, was the natural destiny of a man, the divine impetus, the crown of his existence. But to perform the prosaic and arduous tasks that lead to ultimate width of horizon under the relentless light of her vivid imagination was a position as unsupportable as it was impossible. There was a time and place for everything, more especially for women.

Two estimable ladies with neither imaginations nor nerves upon a board of guardians whereupon he himself sat were a living and corroding terror to Fred. Under the peculiar circumstances it was so difficult to spare and defend them against a hundred subtle blows that men can give back in kind. He had seen too much of what women forced into the brunt of the fight are capable of enduring ever to want to see any more of it.

"You're so exactly right where you are," he said hastily. "I like to see your effect. You bring a breeze into the stuffiest room. We all feel the better for your being there."

"Oh, well, I'm glad I'm satisfactory, even in a general sort of way. Since you like watching my effect, doesn't it strike you that I might like to watch yours, and watch the things that affect you?"

"But you will when—when they've had time to work."

"Which means that for the present I'm better out of your way. It's so extraordinary to be in a man's way in any point."

She sighed, and with proud resignation bowed her head.

"Child, you know I couldn't do without you—in any point. You're the best part in each."

"For the matter of that you could quite well do without

me. There's not one single thing you do, not one single thought you think, that wouldn't be quite as good without me as with me."

There was neither heat nor passion in Jill's light words, but they scorched Fred. He had no words to offer in exchange, but words would have been poor in comparison with the look he gave her.

Jill looked away.

"Even if one can't step in stride—you're overgrown in a variety of ways, Fred; it's difficult to keep up with you—one likes to watch the march—to watch every step of it."

"Oh, Jill, it's such a slow, dull march," her husband protested. "There's no music in it—except what you make," he added tenderly. "There's music in everything since you've come, but naturally it would be inaudible to you."

"Don't you ever get tired?" she cried passionately. "Don't you ever, ever want cheering up, if it's all so dull, and dead, and disgusting? Don't you ever want me near you?"

"You're always near me."

Jill sighed.

"When a man wants a woman's body out of the way, it's so easy for him to say that her spirit is in his waistcoat pocket. In my opinion, Fred, there's a plausible, unanswerable sort of meanness about that spirit business. What a monk you'd have made, wedded to an ideal!—or a widower worshipping his wife safe away in heaven, probably thankful enough, too, to be there, poor creature! You're a born devotee. What the object is matters little."

"I have never had but one object to love, dearest, and I infinitely prefer you on earth to in heaven."

"Ah, I better fit the place! You're so precise, you can see nothing attractive in incongruities."

He searched her brilliant changeful countenance for some inspiration of a soothing nature. Instead it brought an increase of dumbness.

Jill, however, felt anything but dumb.

"I didn't know till yesterday," she said, "that you're writing a book which is going to astonish people—make them sit up—sweep out all the other political economists."

Fred coloured painfully.

"Oh, I didn't pry! Eugene Aram told me. I like him. He could commit any crime with scientific accuracy, but at least he isn't himself an unfathomable grave."

"My dearest! You're not well, you're tired. Shall we run down to Brighton to-day?" said Fred desperately. "I can manage it quite easily."

He flushed; his fingers twitched nervously. The situation was so strange, so appalling; all the painful shyness of his youth came flooding back upon him.

"Oh dear, I feel—I feel like the dogs at Dives' table being thrown bits, with feasts of reason and flows of soul going on just above my head. Sometimes I think I'm not me at all. No, we'll not go to Brighton—I'm quite well; I don't need sea air. Oh, Fred, if only you could know how exasperating secretiveness can be, and that you'd remember sometimes it was fiendish pride that cut off Lucifer in the flower of his youth and ruined his career! I wonder if he really ever was as high-minded and haughty as you can be. We'll not go to Brighton. I'll go call on Nell Devereux instead. Did you know that they'd come home?"

"Of course I did not, else I'd have told you."

"Now, there you are! I feel again as if I ought to be apologising to you. It's always like that!" She threw her arms behind her neck. "You seem to think that—— You—you haven't married a cat! To think that I—I of all people in the world—could accuse you of meanness! I thought you'd forgotten to tell me. You forget most things."

"No important things, Jill."

"Then is everything you do, and think, and mean to do, trivial?"

"It's so difficult to speak of one's self when one has hardly begun, when one rarely knows what the next step is going to be."

"Don't tell me that you don't know off by heart what you're aiming at."

"Aims and the next step are widely different matters. When you're still at sea about your next step, to speak definitely of any aim might sound——"

"But you're thinking definitely enough of it, goodness knows. And no matter how it might sound, there would only be me to hear."

"But you—you're the only one who matters in the very least."

"I really do think you may understand something of God and know a little about the angels; but as for common woman! Can't you conceive what a delight it would be to me to see you grovelling in a fog of doubt about the next step, or any other mortal thing, or occasionally even muddling into it upon no regular plan, just as I might do myself, instead of getting over all the difficulties in the proud seclusion of your own breast, and then marching on with an unbending head, as if you couldn't waver for the life of you? There's something melodramatic in that sort of thing. It's unworthy of you, and extremely selfish. If only you'd let me see you making mistakes sometimes, just for a treat, or even correcting them—the unutterable soothing comfort it would be! And think of the lesson, the example! You're throwing away a most valuable part of yourself. That's not political economy, or any other sort of economy that ever I heard of. Think of yourself sometimes in the light of an object-lesson to encourage the fallible, couldn't you?—like Peter, for example. —You surely don't want to set yourself up above poor Peter, with all his faults.—Then you'll satisfy your conscience, and at the same time get easier to ordinary mortals."

By this time Fred was fairly sweltering under the fiery eloquence of his wife. His still mouth twitched in a way Jill had not before noticed. No change in her husband's face ever escaped Jill. She came forward now and stood close to him.

"Jill, are we quarrelling, dear?" he asked gently.

"Quarrelling!" she groaned. "I only wish we were at anything so human. I defy any one to quarrel with you. One might as well try to quarrel with ancient Egypt or the Equator."

Jill was smiling resolutely, but Fred sighed.

"I am quite aware of my limitations; I always have been. But you knew me so well, I had hoped——"

"You're the one man, living or dead, who ought to have married an angel—and to choose me!"

"Jill, do you regret it?"

"I regret a thousand things. I regret being baffled at every step. I regret having no scope. I regret——" Her voice returned to its softness. "Fred, you've never once in all your life seen the best of me. You've never seen how nice I could be. Just now, of course, I'm being a beast, but"—her eyes were bright with tears, her mouth melted—"but I could really be nice in rather a new way—not a trace of priggishness about it," she murmured wistfully. "And you've never seen even a glimpse of that side of me. What you married me for is an Eleusian mystery."

"Because I believe in you as thoroughly as I love you, and as no other woman's best could ever be half so good as yours, I'm quite content to wait for it."

"But Fred"—the tragedy had left her voice—"but Fred, that's just the point—one of the points, at least—you may have to wait in vain. It wants other people's second best to bring out my best, and in this particular you're morally incapable of obliging me. The constant contemplation of impeccable virtue seems to sort of quench my—oh, you know, my variegated soul. It acts on me like a wet blanket. When I was young, under the shadow of Grandmother Devereux, I used to feel like a glow-worm being always shone out of countenance by a great flaming star. You may have heard of nice girls brought up in the country who could hear the flapping of angels' wings in their hours of meditation. I never heard anything but the flapping of a

wet blanket, and now there is the destroying flop again about my wretched ears. You'll admit it's not fair."

"Jill, this is a most extraordinary state of mind. One feels so helpless in the matter. You're clever and sane——"

"I'm clever enough, worse luck; far too clever to be an angel, unfortunately. But sane? However, with sanity in the state it is, insanity is a dangerous subject to attack. Don't begin to try to account for me, dear Fred; it will only make both of us uncomfortable. To think, Fred," she cried in a new voice, "that we used once to look upon you as plain! Do you know, you've got the most commanding brow of any man I ever met?"

The digression seemed to startle Fred. He stared helplessly. Fortunately, however, for himself he never looked really seriously at his wife, but he knew how much greater she was than her words. It was in Jill in whom he had set his trust, and not in her vain words.

"I wonder if I have low tastes," she murmured pensively. "If I can't in any way worm myself into your higher interests, I really believe I'd rather enjoy cooking your dinner or black—no, I don't think I could black boots. I might manage to patent cream them. But I could score over the dinners—when I'd learnt. You'd never cook one yourself. You'd live on cheap cheese, and die of indigestion. With dinners to be cooked, at least, I'd be indispensable."

Fred's reason seemed to be failing him. This amazing jerkiness! From whence did it come? Where would it end? What would happen in the meantime?

"Not more so than you are now," said he, smothering a sigh.

"Theoretically, perhaps not."

"But, Jill, you have immense ambitions; you wouldn't like a husband who was in any sort of way dependent upon you."

"Well, no, perhaps not. But I'd like one who was lost without me."

"In that case you should be satisfied. To be without you now would be to grope in outer darkness."

"Oh, you'd find your way out of it soon enough," she said, with quivering voice.

"You surely don't want a husband who would lose his head without you?"

"Couldn't you by any possibility understand the delight of helping him to find it?"

"I can't say that I could," said the unhappy man. "This is a most unwholesome state of mind, Jill. It is entirely unlike you. I feel sure that it must be physical. It would be an insult to you to think otherwise. Let us come away somewhere."

"To what purpose?" she said mournfully. "We can't leave ourselves behind."

In the ensuing silence Fred reached out patiently after his scattered senses. He would have been thankful to know what would come next. However entirely adorable, Jill was a difficult person to be prepared for.

"It would be delightful," she said presently, with shining eyes, "to see yourself being as nice as you could be, just for once, and making other people better even than you can imagine them."

"I am clumsy with words, and, dear, it is difficult to suggest things to you. But you can't, I think, understand what your influence over me is—how much better I feel since you've come to me."

"You may feel different, you go on just the same. I like to see feelings made evident in works. It was always the same. You always did put on airs of superiority." She was so angry at the crude injustice of her taunts that her voice grew harsh. "You always held us aloof and sprung surprises on us. There's a want of consideration in that sort of thing. Oh, Fred, don't say you didn't, when you did. The scholarship at Eton, those things at Oxford, even your chance of the title!"

"If only I knew where I fail!" said the deeply tried man.

"Just in never being able to fail."

"If you knew how often I do fail!"

"That I don't is an additional proof of your abominable secretiveness."

Fred drew his fingers slowly across his aching brow.

"You perceive my failure to make you happy only too clearly."

"Oh, how literal you are! I'm not a Quaker; I can't always be yea-yeaing and nay-naying. Have you no imagination? Can't you allow for figures of speech? Fred, you really are exasperating. Did I say I wasn't happy?"

"This hardly looks like happiness."

"Did I ever break out like this before?"

"No. Once is enough. It tells everything."

Her cheeks were white; her eyes too bright for health.

"On the contrary, it only suggests a very little."

"Then things are more hopeless even than I feared."

Perplexed, worried, and deeply concerned, Fred's eyes rested gravely upon her.

"I said that you were never made to hold the half of me. You were made for a nice, touching, early Victorian self-effacing angel in a magenta pork-pie hat. I can see her!"

"Jill, this is very grievous; you are unworthy of yourself. This acute self-consciousness is so disastrously modern. It's beneath you. You are not the mushroom product of a moment of transition. The little brown child who taught and practised Spartan virtue was never made to be the foam of any upheaval."

Jill's eyes were swimming in tears. Her lips shook. Her agitation was, however, insufficient to stem the torrent of her words.

"Ah, at last I've got the truth! You despise me. Oh, don't protest. You've as much as admitted it. I dare say I'm all right as a house and table decoration, and I have a natural gift in ordering dinners, and I can behave decently to your guests, but as for the rest—as for the really valuable part of me being indispensable to the really valuable part of you—I might be a bundle of ribbons with a sweet mouth."

She was leaning towards him eagerly, her eyes now soft

with tears, her pale cheeks burnt; to keep her foolish lips in order, she held them with her little teeth. In Fred's magnanimous opinion she looked mysteriously, surprisingly, pathetically lovely. But he hardened his heart.

"When a man worships a woman as I worship you, Jill, it is sheer cowardly cruelty to try to make him believe, even for a moment, that he has made a mistake. Wantonly to break the ideal of a man is the very refinement of a woman's cruelty. We have so few ideals without some flaw."

Fred, since his face had grown stern, was rising in his wife's estimation immensely. She spoke much more cheerfully.

"If an ideal has to be preserved under a glass case, like wedding cake, it looks as though you were rather nervous about its staying qualities. If ideals are worth anything, they should be put to some practical use—even if it's only to test their value. It isn't fair even to the ideal itself to take it on trust. Every one knows that if things are put aside for pure purposes of contemplation, they'll shrivel up, and go all to pieces."

She paused; it struck her that in certain lights Fred looked absolutely handsome. A beatific vision of Fred's stern face and magnificent silences dominating great assemblies made her catch her breath. The next minute she stood erect and the poise of her small head was regal.

Fred dropped his eyes; it was fatally easy to be weak when one looked at Jill.

"How unworthy it all is!" he said. "How unworthy of both of us!"

"Ah, that's where the sting lies—in the unworthiness. One has to get rid of a large part of oneself somehow; but to be forced into throwing it off in low domestic brawls! No wonder indeed that ideals soon get fairly riddled with cracks."

Fred went to the table and gathered together his papers. Then he came back to her.

"Nothing will persuade me, Jill, that you are well," said Fred, drawn back once more on his last defence, "and a man's ignorance in these matters makes him helpless—possibly

makes him behave like a brute, from your point of view. Dear heart, I wish you would rest."

"Rest! Why should I rest? I'm not tired. Do you want me to be tired at twenty-one?" she cried pathetically. "Is that part of the rôle of an ideal? Oh, if only you could understand something of anything!"

"I understand too much of you at least to suppose that you could ever sink to the rôle of a *femme incomprise*." He spoke with divine patience, but by this time his face was grey. "Jill, will you lie down?"

"And be consistent to my rôle? *Femmes incomprises* always flop."

"Jill! Jill! This is terrible."

There was a dignity mixed with Fred's air of lofty resignation that struck his wife as being rather god-like. Her emotions, if dramatic, being always sincere, she loathed herself for making so interesting a personality miserable. And yet if she had not succeeded in making him miserable! It was a possibility she dared not approach.

She swept round to see Fred's beautiful back in full retreat.

"I wonder," she cried passionately—"I wonder how we'd get on in an attic, you and I?"

"Under present circumstances," said Fred, without turning round, "I fear we should be throwing the furniture at each other's heads."

The tone stung Jill back to her senses.

"No!" she cried out softly, after a little pause. "Oh no! We'd work together, and the longest day would be too short."

There was a dull bang in the distance. She knew that Fred was safe in his little study. She gave one heaving sob, flushed and paled, then she rang for the cook, and arranged all the details of a perfect little dinner for four. Lord Kendrick and Eugene Aram were to dine with them that evening.

If she failed in the great things, she was firmly resolved to shine at least in the little ones. It was impossible to live despising every atom of yourself.

Fred, when he could realise that he was at last alone, leaned

heavily on the table, with a look of startled compassion in his kind and faithful eyes. Could—by any possible chance—could his only and adorable Jill be suffering from that fell feminine complaint known as hysteria? He looked vaguely towards a corner which his uncle had insisted upon furnishing with booklets bearing upon domesticity. Upon second thoughts he looked away. To couple Jill with such literature! He set her down tenderly amongst the sacred mysteries, wiped his wringing forehead, and buckled to his day's work. Once or twice he looked up from his writing to remember some new light that had suddenly pricked up in the wonderful face of his wife, and then he paused to smile.

"I couldn't imagine any one ever doing anything less than his best," he always concluded, "with such a wife. No one could bear to disappoint Jill."

Which shows that even the most clumsy man may have his moments of illumination.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN Jill went to put on her nicest things that afternoon in order to call on Nell, she felt in doubt as to whether she were more cat or martyr—an unholy frame of mind wherein to embark upon any parlous undertaking.

Strange as it may seem, the unbridled emotions that now ravaged Jill and her wretched husband, incredulous as it may seem, portended nothing less than a mighty stirring of love in her ridiculous heart.

Since she could speak, her one conception of love had been service; and this bliss, save in the one brief period of her engagement to Jerry, had consistently been denied her. Being spared had always been the bane of her life, and seemed likely to remain so. In order that she might be spared she had seen her Grandmother Devereux's royal old head stooping, dumb and uncomplaining, week in, week out, over a pork-tub; morning after morning had she seen her come down blue

and shivering from a fireless room, and, though nothing was ever said about it, Jill well knew that, in the existing state of family finances, it must either be a fireless bedroom or no pudding at dinner. Worst of all, she had seen the old woman grope in semi-darkness for two years, that she—victim again to untoward solicitude—might have the chances due to her race. And now here was Fred trying all the old tortures. From morning till night he spared her, he thought for her. His grave solicitude encompassed her like a net. His patient forbearance was a blistering sore. With all her vigorous youth crying aloud for action, her insatiable craving for excitements—with worlds for balls—Jill always felt equal to anything,—not only unsatisfied, but unsuspected, with an imagination rampant always, but now swollen to bursting point with the glories it busied itself in mapping out for Fred's future, Jill felt this cosseting and consideration to be no less than a brand of inferiority.

Jerry had always appreciated her at her true value. He knew her power and knew when to make use of it. As to putting her by in safe places and saving her, that was not Jerry's way.

She paused to hoist an impossible purple rose on her hat into a more commanding position, and in the pause her ardent thoughts flew off to Fred's face, already, no doubt, tired and dull; miserable first-fruits of her morning's brawl.

An unutterable longing to follow hot on his heels in order to undo her precious handiwork now got possession of Jill. Her vivid face grew tender. She saw Fred's light up under her proposed ministrations, as she had but once before beheld it—that unforgettable day in the orchard when he had looked like Stephen.

She threw down her Paris hat, laid her head on the pillow and gave a little sob or two. She felt shame-stricken, forlorn. And who knew or who cared? Did he ever conceive of such a thing, Fred would look confused—in a heavenly sort of way—and counsel her to lie down!

She throbbed with sorrow when suddenly it was borne in

upon her practical mind to inquire what all the agitation was about. Grabbing at any solution to this somewhat pertinent question, Jill discovered that not three hours ago she had been fairly forced into fighting for her rights in an absolutely wrong way; that in her most just and righteous attempt she had been unjustly, ignobly, and abominably defeated.

Her sobs ceased; she seized the bower of purple roses and drove it into place—fortunately at the right angle for her shapely head, and then, with wide, unwinking eyes, she grasped the excellence of her general effect. And baffled, sore, vexed, aching with jealousy of the better part of Fred, she put on her gloves and beheld visions of martyr crowns.

How lofty, how worthy, how full of anguish, how comprehensible this jealousy, compared with any low suspicion into which a woman might enter—a woman, forsooth, set against the better part of Fred! And in the insane yet legitimate attempt to lay hold upon this inestimable treasure, to have succeeded only in forfeiting Fred's blind devotion, which, now that it was melting from her grasp, seemed as dear, as rare, and lovely as it was quaint! Even if it came back, what was devotion, after all, if a man, all owing to the beautiful, guileless simplicity of his disposition, can't understand you, and therefore must find it impossible really to appreciate you.

It was a tragedy of undeserved failures. Jill felt that she had a full right to all her woes. A firm resolve at least to conceal the humiliation of her fall—together with the effects of the morning's rout—gave Jill somewhat of the grand air as she swam into Nell's boudoir.

Nell, not yet quite at home in civilisation, upon beholding the dazzling vision, gasped, faltered, tried to get up, and dropped back amongst her cushions.

"She's little and pitiable, and she wears pale blue in a South African sort of way, and as to her being of the slightest use to Jerry—— ! But she's not a cat."

This rushed like lightning through Jill's telegraphic brain, and, generous by instinct, her grandeur slipped clean away.

She sat down softly and, feeling that one would as soon hurt an unfledged bird as this poor little thing, was soon being a mother to Nell.

As she talked, so her spirits lifted. The child-like devotion of the little creature to her incomparable husband, her immeasurable faith in him, with its odd touch of awe, moved Jill.

"It's delightful," she reflected—"like Arcadia, or a good book, and so extraordinary when applied to Jerry with no one but herself to fall back upon. There's simply nothing for it but to make him keep up to her notions of him. I think I may be of some little, tiny use after all," she thought, with a thrill of humility, "without bothering any one. Jerry could never take care of any one so dependent and hopeful as that by himself."

She breathed a sigh of ineffable benignity. Already did her hands seem full to overflowing.

There was a protecting, cherishing look in Jill's eyes as they rested upon his wife which at once startled and mystified Jerry when presently he came in. It was a refining influence, and curbed for the moment the insupportable sense of revolt against a cruel fate which the very first instant he saw Jill thrust up its ugly head in his facile breast.

Jill with a maternal air! Jerry was genuinely touched. After a melancholy survey of the scene, a moment fraught with bitter memories, in spite of himself Jerry smiled. In the smile there was some sanity and more humour. Whereupon, fortified and restored, he sailed regally into the safe harbour of tea-carrying.

A slight alteration in Jill's demeanour following hard upon his entrance may have contributed its quota to this philosophic serenity. It was only when looking at Nell that her eyes bewildered by their brooding solicitude; directed upon himself they shone with a less transcendental light, and the words she spoke were precisely to the point. There was still some of the old leaven left in Jill.

Jerry set himself delightedly to revive old memories,

Wherever Jill was was there a snap of frost in the sunny air. Jerry was a man whom tonics had always benefited, and a residence in a torrid zone had materially increased his need for them. Since his return he had indeed not neglected the demands of his peculiar constitution in this regard. Finding at home only anodynes, he had gone further afield for spurs and had found them, as his amiable father-in-law meant that he should find them, in the superb fever of City life.

Jerry was a born gambler, and his luck was magnificent. The great whirlpool of the City was just what he wanted. It was stimulating, wide and free, and he had lost his youthful taste for heights. It was, moreover, an immense safeguard. Jerry clung pathetically to any morality not connected with the higher commerce.

In the necessary intervals for rest, the domestic hearth, simple pleasures, and Nell became positive boons.

But Jill? Jill was a breath out of that old lost heaven which he was doing his discreet best to forget.

When he had swallowed a cup of Nell's unrivalled tea and again looked at Jill, Jerry felt equal to most things. He could cherish Nell or satisfy Jill's most exacting demand; strengthened and invigorated he would regain every inch of his lost ground under exceptionally encouraging conditions, and no one need be a penny the worse. It was a superb outlook and Jill understood him perfectly. And in spite of love, jealousy, and general agitation, in spite of heart, reason, judgment, and common honesty, all Jill's old, fearless, uplifting sense of power, came flooding back upon her. Once again Jill felt that now she could do justice to herself and everything for Jerry.

For pure joy they both began to talk at once; then they laughed merrily, and then they knew that they had only been parted for one little hour and nothing worth while had happened in the meantime.

To Nell's anxious, loving gaze, Jerry seemed to have grown inches, and as he filled her teapot he looked to her a most fit descendant of many heathen kings, for in a mouse-like way Nell adored pedigree.

And the whole room was presently so full of hope and youth and love and ambition, with the prickings of honest endeavour, that the very waiters paused in the lobby to listen to the babble of delight. And because they were both kind by nature and on principle, and because no two creatures so happy and human could make an inoffensive third knowingly unhappy, Nell was happy also so long as they were all three together.

But when Jerry had gone to see Jill home, and the electric thrill of his last surreptitious little touch on her shoulder had worn off, of a sudden Nell began to feel dreadfully humble, and sick and sorry; her fluffy head began to ache; her eyes grew full of a confusion of pain which ended, alas! in tears and pink rims; her nose, in sympathy, turned red; her sweet appealing mouth drooped feebly and grew peevish, and it was upon that afternoon that Nell first began to stoop from the shoulders. But what wilted Nell braced Jill.

"Let us send home the carriage and walk," said she, sniffing the warm air, sweet with the scent of a great green box of mignonette. "Oh, Jerry, I'm so thankful I can like your wife. I meant to hate her. It's so hard to forgive any one who has ever made a person you care for ridiculous."

Jerry winced.

"But I can't think she meant it. She must have been absolutely sure that she was going to die. Jerry, you're glad she didn't?"

It would have been difficult to say why Jill felt so anxious for the answer.

Obviously it was about to be a difficult conversation. Jerry girded up his loins to the task.

"Oh, Jill, you're just the same as ever. You *must* go straight at things."

This was evasion, and Jill knew it.

"So far as I can see, going crooked at them won't alter facts. One can't very well blot out you or Nell, or Nell's thousands, or—oh! well, Jabez, fortunately perhaps, is lost in the distance. Can't you see that it is a sort of an all-round insult to ignore any one, or to purse up your mouth and

refuse to discuss things as though any of them had been disreputable? Jerry, are you truly glad that Nell did not die?"

"I am," said Jerry honestly.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Jill, after a pause. "If you had not been, it would have been low. Isn't it fortunate that we're cousins, so being friends must seem only natural. Being married can't alter the ties of blood. I think Nell is not an exacting girl, and would be rather surprised if we weren't friends. Although I think—I'm afraid—she might have been happier had I been worse dressed—and scraggy—for instance. I'm glad," she murmured sweetly, "that in a conventional sort of way she's prettier than I am; it will be a great comfort to her."

Jerry dared not look at her.

"Jill! Oh, Jill, you know she's not to be compared with you in anything."

"If you begtn to compare us, Jerry, you'll be certain to put your foot in it," said Jill superbly. "We are not in the least comparable. We're as wide apart as the poles—very fortunately. It balances affairs better.—It must be delightful to be really amiable." She sighed, this time less majestically. "And you'll want amiability. Living at high pressure will get on your nerves, in time, and you'll grow irritable. You'll want fireside amiability, if ever man did, Jerry. Do you tell all your business worries to Nell?'

"Tell Nell! No, indeed, I don't. She'd worry herself to death over them. Nell is a girl one must spare. She's not at all strong."

Jill's eyes flashed.

"In that case—you know it's never necessary to spare me—I'm tough, oh, Jerry, I can still be of a little use to you, perhaps."

"Jill! Jill! The very sight of you gives me new life."

"I wonder—I wonder," she mused, "if an occasional sight of me would be of any use in keeping you out of scrapes.

Jerry, I feel a horrid certainty that you're ripe for some folly. Your mouth is not at all improved. If—if Nell does you real harm, I'll never forgive her."

All the old Jill throbbed in her voice.

Jerry felt giddy and dazed. Moreover, he did not feel yet quite up to her fire of criticism.

Jill's tolerance, he had noticed, always grew with smart exercise.

"Come across there by that tree," said he artlessly, and with that he struck out bravely.

The walk gave Jill time to think. Her thoughts flounced off to Fred. It was nice to know that although Jerry as a human being was deeply interesting, no effort of mortal man or woman could ever endow his countenance with the still and beautiful power apparent in that of Fred. The reflection drew her off her original track.

"Oh, Jerry, I'm really glad that you're rich, and can have an enormous house. I don't want to say anything nasty, but there are so few women one would care to be shut up with in a small flat on a wet day. Under such conditions a wife would become such an inexorable sort of thing. In a big house, with distractions, she'd be a most delightful interruption;"—she paused and sighed—"sometimes quite a divine sort of interruption. Some women really enjoy that sort of thing. I feel sure Nell would."

She sighed again. Jerry could not imagine why, and was not made much wiser by her next remark.

"I really think the only man I've ever known I could stand being shut up with on a wet day is Fred. Everything about Fred is in such thorough order; he could never be in the way, and he bears the closest inspection, and doesn't require setting. So many husbands would be utterly lost out of their frames. You haven't seen him yet; you'll be surprised. You know his features—big and rugged and dominant, not domineering—Fred never domineers—but not handsome or bronze-god-like at all; he's much too uncommon for that. You notice him the instant you go into a room; every one

does. It's quite Saul amongst the prophets, you know. It's really extraordinary how he's altered."

"Possibly," said Jerry, with a touch of stiffness. "It's your point of view that has altered."

"It's nothing of the sort. Have I ever been the shuttlecock of sentiment? If Fred looked mean, I'd be the first to know it. You must have forgotten me."

"I have forgotten nothing."

"There is much," she said virtuously, "that it would be well you did forget. Only, Jerry, you must never forget that we all want to have the chance of being proud of you. And we're rather hard to please as a family. We—we are more exacting than Nell, you know; perhaps because we are less innocent. You mustn't disappoint us."

"Jill, if you'll help me I'll do anything."

"As a matter of fact the minute I saw you I knew that I should have to be helping you. Why is it that you must want help?"

Jerry's voice shook with feeling.

"That you may help me."

"Don't be theatrical."

Jill stood up and with a fine calm walked on.

"I hope to goodness a residence in a torrid zone hasn't touched your brain, Jerry. Whatever you may have been, you were seldom idiotic."

When Jerry next ventured into words, he thought it both wise and kind to bring in Fred. In this he did well. Jill's thoughts bulged with Fred.

"I haven't seen Fred yet, as you know," said Jerry, "but I've heard a lot about him. He's already a coming man. He won't speak much even at a committee meeting, but he inspires any words that matter, so I'm told. You'll have the life you've always longed for, Jill," he said, real hard pain in his voice—"you'll be the helper of a great man."

His eyes, honest and sad, as they turned to watch Jill closely slowly narrowed and altered. Jill's sharp eyes caught the shifty gleam.

"You've forgotten," she said, with serene dignity—"you've forgotten that Fred has never called for help—that sort of help. He's always been able to help himself."

Contrasts invariably impressed Jill. At that moment so proud did she feel of Fred that she went quite near to forgetting her own grievances.

"But it's different now, of course—being married ——"

"You wouldn't expect that sort of thing to alter Fred! He's not a kaleidoscope with phases to be moved at one's pleasure. He's made in one piece and moves himself. To do the small things perfectly, and wait for the great, doesn't need the disturbance of stray oars. Thank heaven, I've never been a busybody. I have some sense of restraint."

"You're just as unaltered as Fred is, I imagine. You're made to help."

There had been a subtle irritation under Jill's valiant words that had made Jerry's heart beat faster. He would have sacrificed much for Jill's happiness, but in Jill, unappreciated and heartsore because of it, there were infinite possibilities. The better part of Jerry was very dull and sad and lonely, the sadness and the loneliness more grey and cold and colossal, perhaps, because of the nearness of Jill.

Jill's chin was in the air.

"I'm made to help those who need help," said she. "I'll never fail you, Jerry."

Jerry bit his lip, but he was absolutely good-natured, and the secret knowledge which the moment before had filled him with triumph brought him now a thrill of true tenderness.

"I'm not the least proud, Jill," he said, "I'll take your offer and thank you for it."

"Jerry," she burst out, "you're as nice and forgiving as ever you were, and I'm horrid. I've been feeling lately that I've gone off. It's a dreadful sensation."

"Don't try to change. You're good enough as you are—for me," he added softly.

"Oh, you! You were always easily pleased," she said tartly. "It's that fatal good-nature of yours. But if people,"

her voice softened, "have lofty, severe, rather harsh standards for themselves, and are extremely lenient to you—it—it makes you more particular, you know. Besides, I never did like disappointing even myself. Think of disappointing other people ——!" She faltered, and broke off, but not for long. "Oh, Jerry, for goodness' sake hail that cab! We have early dinner for a meeting of Fred's. And, Jerry, when you see Fred, do notice how altered he is for the better. Don't you remember his horrid little moustache? Now it's just right, and men like him awfully. If there's one creature I do detest it's a woman's man—a bad imitation of oneself, and the most despicable of our faults, with a few of his own minor ones thrown in. And the odd thing is that he always despises you. Think of being despised by a parcel of damaged samples! Pah! Good-bye, Jerry! I'll ask Nell to dinner on Monday."

CHAPTER XXVII

From this moment Jill's hands were indeed full, and her life swept on with a fine flourish. It soon seemed as though neither Jerry nor Nell could do without her, and their wants were many and imperious.

Nell's timid, shrinking, half-unwilling, wholly pathetic dependence was an immense relief both to her and to Jerry. It solved a multitude of doubts, while the quaint motherly touches it brought out in Jill amused and charmed Fred. It was plainly just what she wanted. It seemed to break off the suspicion of glitter which had previously hurt him a little as he followed slowly in the bright track of his wife. There was now to his admiring eyes no meretricious tawdry flash in Jill's radiant course; abroad and at home she went lightly and blithe. Sometimes he would hear her singing again as she went up the stairs, and her voice had been silent now for months.

That unsatisfied restlessness from which she suffered had been a phase due probably to over-fatigue, and to a natural

enough reaction after a surfeit of pleasure. The state thus interpreted was entirely comprehensible to Fred.

That Jill's hankerings after active work were in any measure due to spiritual strivings, or promptings of true benevolence, even Fred's reverent worship could not go so far as to credit. She was so young still, a child with a child's charm, a child's hardness of heart.

Nothing so ultimately perfect as Jill, reflected Jill's husband, was ordained to be—could be built up in a day. That demon of activity, whipping her into work for which she was pre-eminently unfitted, had been a phase—possibly in the direct line of development.

As for Jerry: to be jealous of Jerry in any poignant connection would, to Fred's mind, have been as far beneath him as it would have been beneath his conception of Jill. Jerry was so very far beneath both of them.

Meanwhile Jill's interests were his, and his old affection for Jerry had never waned. As for helping the unhelpable, or even advising them, that was the privilege of women and the leisured classes; he had neither time nor talent for tilting at windmills.

And yet in all the big City of London Fred was Jerry's best friend, and kept him on his legs probably longer than any other human soul could have done.

Jerry, who, blessed with an assured income, might now, as a country gentleman, very well have followed after righteousness, was in the turmoil of the City unsatisfactory to the marrow of his bones. He was reckless with the cautious recklessness of a sensitive man with good impulses and unsound blood at work within him. He had lately taken to gamble, moreover, in private houses, as well as in public shares. And all his transactions had a fatal *élan* and magnificent audacity about them. Moreover, if Jerry chose to charm, few could protect themselves against being charmed, while from the moment he found himself in possession of a full and sufficient income, he had fallen into the way of really almost believing in his own honesty. This made him effective and convincing in an unusual degree.

In spite of his resolute feeling of personal security, Fred knew perfectly well that Jill, staunch, ardent, headstrong as she was, would refuse to see the truth about Jerry. When forced upon her recognition she would fight it and spend herself, in all probability, in vain efforts to bolster up Jerry's weakness. She would fail and suffer, and in this matter Fred conceived that his hands were tied. Jill was Jill. She must work out her own salvation after her own fashion, and he had never a doubt as to her capacity to do it. He must suffer, too, and the waiting would be weary.

Fred, however, was not of a hopeful nature, and had never expected a bed of roses with Jill. He had never reached any blessing easily; how could he expect to attain to his incomparable wife? Fred believed greatly in the goodness of women, and had all the obstinate tenacity of a silent, conscientious, somewhat joyless nature. And so his quiet, unquestioning attitude, his increasing absorption in his own affairs, made Jill's heart ache with misery and burn with wrath.

Fred's life seemed to grow fuller every hour of the day and hers more empty. She had compensations, certainly; there was Jerry, of course, and Nell. They kept her busy. But she could have compressed them, after all, into the pauses, and given up all the rest of the time to Fred. She had to help them, of course—neither could do without her—but there was no strain in the labour, not so much as the strain of a nerve. Now with Fred one would have to live at full pitch always, and generally stand on tip-toe.

Fred's affairs were, as a matter of fact, now of considerable importance. His uncle wished him to prepare for a political career, and, although his religious principles left much to be desired, finding him a faithful servant, Lord Kendrick was fast shifting over upon him a multitude of the responsibilities connected with the Kendrick estates.

Quite great events were being enacted behind Jill's back, so she used to tell herself, and how adorably straight and clear and comprehensible they all were, so full of size and honour, now resonant of lofty possibilities!

It was, on the contrary, difficult to grasp the full significance of Jerry's affairs, as demonstrated by Jerry and Jerry's friends —delightful people, however, and peculiarly exhilarating. In their expert handling she could fairly touch most of the points in Jerry's ventures, and grow keen in the pursuit of those less apparent, so finely did they yield to explanation. But when explained in honest slang by those more simple young friends who, having come to love, remained to serve, they dwindled off into faint specks upon a vast horizon.

Nothing Fred thought it worth his while to become absorbed in could ever dwindle to a point. No matter who handled it, it could only gain in the handling. A minute of Fred's endeavour could be fuller and more momentous than an eternity of Jerry's, and yet it was Jerry's affairs that were heaping up her minutes.

Meanwhile, Nell, indispensable as Jill was to the poor little thing, wished often in her desolate aloneness that she might be permitted, yet without offence, to have her husband to herself again. Mrs. de Salis, also, who walked by experience, as we know, and not by faith, was growing seriously disturbed by Jill in her character of angel upon an alien hearth. Lord Kendrick groaned in spirit, and his time, thanks to Fred, being now mostly at his own disposal, he spent it, when not engaged in tracking Jill's course, in whisking Eveleen Brooke round to drawing-room meetings. At this period the only thoroughly contented person in the small circle was Jerry. Everything he touched throve. He was a brilliant figure upon many courses.

Nell, he reflected, was as happy as her sweet and anxious nature would permit, and wistfulness became her. Good, slow, plodding Fred was, as he always had been, his best friend, and Jill was the joy and centre of his life. As for his conscience, Jerry had got the whip-hand of his conscience. He floated like a cork in his fool's paradise.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"CŒLIA, have you called on Jill Morton yet?" said Mrs. de Salis one hot, throbbing day, to her daughter, cool, calm, and exquisite, a dream of sea-green draperies set in an opal-tinted room.

Cœlia fitted every occasion to perfection. What one always remembered about her was a sense as of a carefully thought, out scheme of infallibility. From her nice mind to her arched instep she was, every inch of her, most right and admirable. And no sinner ever left her presence without a nervous palpitation. After an unbroken course of Cœlia her mother was invariably obliged to consult a heart specialist.

Mrs. de Salis, when her affections were seriously implicated, sometimes spoke impulsively.

Cœlia had noticed the eagerness in the tones of her very surprising mother, and paused before lifting up her own gentle voice.

"No, mother, I have not yet decided whether I shall call or not."

"Good gracious, Cœlia, not call on Jill?"

"I should like to call, but it is not always advisable to follow one's inclinations. I don't say I won't call; I shall wait. Rash decisions seem to me to show want either of principle or intelligence."

Mrs. de Salis sighed restively.

"You have such a funny way of bringing your whole internal econony into play before you'll budge in the simplest matter. What's there to decide upon before calling on an old friend?"

"I am sure I should be sorry to be snobbish," said Cœlia, with pathetic humility, "but the world happens to be singularly so. My calling or not must to a great extent influence Mrs. Morton's position."

"Oh! Because you are going to be a countess? For the matter of that, so is Jill."

"There is nothing particularly definite about Mrs. Morton's position. And really, mother, even your odd predilection for her can hardly make you think our positions at all comparable. Rank," she murmured meekly, "isn't everything."

"I remember the time when you rated it pretty high."

"It is our right. *We* have done nothing to forfeit it."

There was an inflection on the word which turned the smooth pink of Mrs. de Salis's cheeks scarlet. This foolish woman still retained an incorrigible habit of blushing.

"There are, moreover, higher concerns involved," said Cœlia.

"Oh, my dear, don't trouble to catalogue them. Your sense of sound religion alone——"

Cœlia threw up her pink palms.

"Dearest mother, don't! It hurts me. I can't help being, from your point of view, perhaps, almost ridiculously sensitive in regard to the things about which I feel deeply."

"I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world, child. I've spent the best years of my life in considering them. I seem to have been grovelling on tip-toe in front of your transcendental emotions ever since you were born. The fine feelings of the three of you will end in bringing my tinted hairs with sorrow to the grave. But about Jill. There's no earthly reason you shouldn't call on her."

"I am glad you are quite satisfied that there is not. It is so helpful to hear all sides of a question. I've been hearing so much of another side that must, were it true, put my ever calling at all quite out of the question."

"You always did like listening to the jealous ravings of old women, Cœlia," cried Mrs. de Salis, whose temper, alas! had but slight staying powers.

"My dearest mother!"

"I wish to goodness, Cœlia, your religion and your rare delicacy of feeling would teach you some charity. If that sort of thing does nothing but irritate your nerves and other people's tempers——"

"Darling mother, you'll be so sorry afterwards—you're so kind, so generous—you know you will; you always are," pleaded her incomparable daughter.

"Very likely," said the poor sinner ruefully. "If I'm not, you take good care to make me. But do let us keep to Jill. Jill is as sound as a bell. All that's wrong with her is too much human nature."

Cœlia's sigh was almost a groan.

"Oh, if you have to bring up human nature! Directly a woman's name gets mixed up with human nature one feels rather hopeless."

"Cœlia, you're delightful! However, to get back, Jill hasn't done growing any more that human nature has. So long as anything is in course of developement, it's liable to error."

"I hope, dear, that none of us have ceased to grow," said Cœlia mildly. "Does it not strike you, however, as somewhat crude to permit the mistakes inevitably interwoven with all the steps in one's advancement to become more apparent than any progress made! When the processes of developement do little but give rise to odious gossip, then indeed one begins to fear."

"Dear me! But we're getting no farther. I want to know precisely what Jill has done to prevent your calling on her."

"Nothing so far, I hope, but she appears to be on the road to several things."

"She may appear to be. Appearances aren't much nowadays. Jill does herself injustice, that I quite admit. I must apologise for the obnoxious term, but I fear she has too much humanity to reap any good from idleness."

"Idleness! She surely has the occupations of her class. I only wish that I could sometimes be idle!"

"But, dearest, your instincts are all so right. You fall as a matter of course into improving pursuits and possess a mood in reserve to suit each. So long as a woman can feel uplifted by a glow of true religion because she's opening a bazaar, she's safe. Have you consulted Alleyne about calling on Jill?"

"Alleyne? No, Alleyne has important affairs to attend to."

"The reputation of an innocent woman seems to me to be a fairly important affair. I wish you had asked Alleyne. I know his manners hurt your feelings, but to my mind he's too thoroughly a man not to be a gentleman, and men don't play fast and loose with a woman's name, whatever they may do with her life."

"My dear mother, do you imply—"

"Goodness me! I imply nothing. You are a lady to your pointed finger-tips—you have lovely hands, Cœlia—but a perfect lady may make a precious poor gentlewoman."

"I have sometimes wondered," said Cœlia, soft and sad, "if you have ever quite realised your responsibility as a mother."

Mrs. de Salis looked thoughtfully around the room.

"Well, upon my word! Considering what you are now and were the day I received you from the sainted hands of your aunts, your sole points heelless slippers and a stoop——"

"There are other duties."

"I haven't neglected them. Every one of you has what she wants, and what best suits her."

"There are higher things."

"I do not attempt impossibilities. I could never have reached to your heights, my child. And since you're so eminently qualified to reach them alone, it would have been presumption upon my part to try. My talent, I think, runs to odd jobs; to providing you all with the things necessary to your several constitutions, and sparing your feelings."

Cœlia sighed, bowed her head, and clasped her hands. In this prayerful attitude she might well have sat as model for a Madonna.

"I have so often longed for guidance."

"You got it, dear. I guided you to three country houses, two complete sets of diamonds, a historical emerald, several——"

"You don't understand—you have never understood!"

"I understand the less; the greater I have left in your own competent hands. I understood," she said, with a snap of her

fine eyes, "just enough to prevent Reggy Ffloyd's going to the dogs when you threw him over for Alleyne."

"Mother, how can you! Who advised me——"

"I did. And yet you accuse me of neglecting my responsibilities. Have you no gratitude?"

Cœlia's face was white; her eyes were wide. As a model for a Madonna she was no longer eligible.

Mrs. de Salis moved uneasily. It was startling and awe-inspiring to see Cœlia moved by other than entirely unexceptional motives. Her maternal eyes strayed inquiringly towards the sea-green portière. Cœlia lifted her head.

"Alleyne has gone to Ranelagh," she breathed softly.

"Oh, well, that's fortunate. If it was me, Cœlia, I'd have some whisky and Apollinaris. But, Cœlia, you do look dreadful, child! What do you take on these occasions?"

The curious, half-amused, distressed note in her mother's voice, with its touch of bitter mockery, steadied Cœlia. She sat erect, and forced herself into composure.

"Mother," she said, and her quiet voice trembled, "was it you who took Reggy in hand?—who got him that appointment?"

"Yes, I got it—and trouble enough I had too, and embarrassment. No one could understand why I didn't apply to Alleyne. One word from him would have been enough. However, I got the appointment. Reggy's safe in Cyprus, and not a single week passes but I hear from the boy. Cœlia, do you mean to tell me you cared for Reggy, just as, say, a podgy clergyman's daughter might do?"

"As if you didn't know!" Her voice was sincerity itself.

Mrs. de Salis looked at her.

"Upon my word," she said half-absently, "I believe if you put the thumb-screw on a marble font—there was always a look of church properties about you, Cœlia—you'd wring some human feeling out of it. I couldn't have believed it of you, Cœlia."

"And you—you to say you understand me! Do you think that I'm heartless, soulless?"

"I think, dear, that you have plenty of soul and a vast amount of discretion, and are quite equal to overcoming a sea of folly."

"You to speak like this—you!"

Cœlia was growing only too human. In some cases adder's poison may lurk in humanity. Since she, too, had memories, Cœlia's mother reddened.

"It's just because I am I that I do speak. As you so often have reminded me, I have had an all-round experience of life. I am startled, I must confess, in finding this sort of thing in you. It only shows us to cease from judging and cultivate faith. I'm glad on the whole that you are after all capable of a stout, honest, misplaced attachment. You are a good woman, with correct instincts, Cœlia. When you've put down your heel on this episode, and are a little older and less interesting to yourself in your character of young mother and model wife, your attention will stray to your husband. You'll find points in him that are very soothing and have an attraction all their own. By the time Alleyne has gout I shouldn't wonder though you were placidly attached to him. By the time your hair is grey, and you have lost other things besides your teeth, you may possibly understand the elementary parts in the beauty of Alleyne's devotion to you. It's the history of many an irreproachable British matron."

"Mother, you are very hard. I believe—I believe you would have been different if—if I had been wicked."

"It would have killed me to have had a wicked girl!" said Mrs. de Salis, with her first real flash of feeling. "But—but if you hadn't all been so immaculate! I've been so lonely always in the midst of you. Your instincts are all so superior. You must always be judging me for what I—I—didn't do. And you knew the right so well, and did it, every one of you. I had no trouble, I had merely to point the way; you never gave me half enough to do, or a moment's anxiety. You—all of you—knew your own true interests, and knew that I had them at heart. I know I ought to be thankful. But, oh, if sometimes you hadn't known your true interests, if you

hadn't been so wise, if you had occasionally lost your beautiful tempers under the lash of discreet counsel! If, when I laid bald truths about indigent lovers before you, you hadn't grasped them with such infallible rectitude, and, without winking an eyelid, discharged the lovers! If just once you'd raged round like furies! The only hard or wearing work you've ever given me was to console your lovers, to sweep up their broken hearts out of the gutter. Between you all you've driven me into—into being a sort of social scavenger!"

"Mother!" she wailed, "you shouldn't say such things about yourself; it's not fair to us."

"I've always been fair to you, child; being fair to you has been my retribution, I think. But one wants some relief sometimes out amongst the publicans and things."

"In that case," said Cœlia, now restored to calm, "since you really wish it, I shall call to-morrow on Mrs. Morton. I can now, at least, quite understand your extraordinary interest in her——"

Mrs. de Salis went straight over and kissed her daughter.

"Oh, Cœlia, a sinner would have put it in a prettier way, but I'm thankful to you, dear; and it's nice to know that you too could ever have been just a little foolish"—with a smile in which mockery and tears were strangely blended she looked at her splendid daughter—"it brings you so near. Upon my word, I can even see in you again, after all these years, a little sweet, smiling baby, with hair like ripe corn, and tiny grasping hands. How proud I used to be when they used to grab at me, and butt at your aunts! It's hundreds of years, I think, since I've thought of you as a baby. It's seemed now for so long, almost like an impertinence to mix you up with anything so pulpy and apology-provoking as helpless infancy. Cœlia, surely it's tea-time."

CHAPTER XXIX

CŒLIA had an insistent habit of mind, and upon those rare occasions in which the beautiful ordered crust of her existence was disturbed, and a throb of life permitted to break through, the desire to know more than were perhaps wise could buffet and drive her as fiercely as it might the least of Eve's daughters. She had found out that morning a great deal about Reggy Ffloyd and a little about her mother, and the weird workings of the first taste of lawlessness upon a correct mind, wise enough to regard the moral invasion as a fine touch of courage, had restored all her equanimity. When she set forth to pay her promised call, therefore, she felt more secure even than usual in the serene righteousness of all her points of view—in consequence, less inclined to dally with sin—and with a more earnest desire than ever to swim before Jill's abashed eyes a heaven-sent example. She found Jerry, without his wife, firmly established on the sofa, the lawful husband, grave, but unconcerned, making for the door.

Jill put down a cup and ran to her, both hands outstretched.

"Oh, Cœlia," she cried, "I've been expecting you." She stooped forward, then drew back with a laugh. "No, it was against our principles to kiss, wasn't it? We'll go on upon the old lines. Jerry, you remember Cœlia?—How pretty you've grown! To think that I could ever have chevied such perfection through a furze covert! Why, your feet, even then, used to be like little pink flowers. And now—now you've got two babies! You must be lovely as a mother, Cœlia. Jerry, give her some of the other cake, do—that's saw-dusty."

Jill was hovering with admiring interest about her old friend.

"Jerry, wouldn't she look nice being a mother? I hate to see that sort of thing done badly. And half the women one knows look as if they'd got hold of the wrong baby, and are trying to smile off the doubt."

As a sphere of influence Cœlia seemed to herself to be dwindling slowly. She was cold all down her aristocratic back. She, the model mother in an exclusive circle, come upon a pure errand of mercy, to be addressed like this!

Pausing to put her points of view back in their places, she lost the pleasing spectacle of Jerry's sleepy eyes growing suddenly astute, and the beginning of Jill's prompt break into the jargon of commerce. But she soon seized her opportunity.

"I have been hearing so much of Mr. Morton," she murmured in a lull. "People speak of him as being so high-minded, a man who will go far. Surely, surely he can have no dealings with the Stock Exchange?"

"Fred! Good gracious, no! He detests the City, and believes in nothing but Three per Cents."

"But you seem to know so much of the City, to be so interested in it."

"Well, of course. Why, Jerry's dealings there are colossal."

Cœlia primmed her lips, prepared a speech, and with a certain gingerliness in their calm depths turned her eyes upon Jerry.

"One has got into such a way of thinking of the City as a great whirlpool which sucks up hearts and souls and homes and reputations," she said softly, "and casts forth dreadfully rich people with daughters who invariably want to be presented, that it's quite pleasant to meet any one so untouched by excitement as you, Mr. Devereux."

"'The City' is so comprehensive a term," said Jerry pleasantly. "It's not always at fever heat. Just now it's unusually quiet, which may account for my apparent calm."

"I'm so ignorant in the matter. It's the one thing about which my husband puts down his foot. He will not have company-promoting people to dinner. And as to women," said Cœlia sweetly, "quite nice women, who meddle in these things, he literally abhors them. My husband is deliciously boyish and exaggerated in his likes and dislikes. He says that a woman in the City is a besom of destruction, and that since she's begun to peacock round there things have been going

rapidly to the dogs. Sometimes Alleyne's odd stand in this matter is rather embarrassing," she concluded, with a silvery laugh. "I only hope it won't make us unpopular."

"I shall like your husband," said Jill serenely. "I think I know just what he means. It's a good thing, Cœlia, that you have so nice a mind. I feel sure he'd never put up with one that wasn't. Jerry has an ineradicable habit of promoting companies, so of course you wouldn't under any circumstances ask him to dinner; but that needn't prevent your calling on his wife."

Cœlia's eyes fixed themselves with an entire absence of expression upon a bowl of roses.

"Mrs. Devereux would as soon think of peacocking round the City as shooting pigeons at Hurlingham. You won't wonder when you see her. She's rather like a hare-bell. Imagine a hare-bell buttoning Jews in Lombard Street."

Cœlia rose with dignity. Jill laid a quick hand on her shoulder.

"Don't say you won't come to-day to see Nell, for I want you to take me with you. My one horse is laid up. It will be delightful to sit behind your pair of beauties. Jerry, tell Lady Alleyne something about the City while I'm gone. Cœlia, I won't be one second."

She flashed a glance impish with wicked glee upon Jerry, and was gone.

"I should be very pleased to call upon Mrs. Devereux," said Cœlia, rigid with contained fury, "at some future time. To-day it is really quite out of the question."

"I'm so glad that you don't hold me accountable for the suggestion," said Jerry sympathetically. "You wouldn't like to drive off now, without waiting? I can explain."

"What! Beat a hasty retreat. We can't very well do that sort of thing," laughed the future countess, in her most countess-like manner.

"Under ordinary conditions," said Jerry placidly, "there would have been presumption in the mere suggestion that you might be persuaded to do so; but ordinary laws have

to give way before Jill's invincibility. In the end we all obey her."

"That certainly is a pity. An overbearing temperament is a sad drawback in a woman. I had hoped that Mrs. Morton had outgrown the tendency."

"She's wonderfully little changed," he said, with a laugh, both bright and sincere.

Cœlia glanced at him.

"The chivalry latent in most men," she said gently, "puts them almost pathetically at the mercy of the caprices of women. They are so obstinate in believing us incapable of anything but the highest. They judge us so gently, and will persist in mistaking temper for spirit. Ah, I hear Mrs. Morton. How quick you've been! It will be delightful to drive you home."

"And you, Jerry? You can't get a cab anywhere near here on account of that wretched bazaar. You'll certainly lose your appointment, unless you're an angel, Cœlia, and will give him a lift. You won't mind, will you?" said she, in her irresistible voice.

"No," said Cœlia icily, "I shall not mind."

Before Jill got back that evening Lady Alleyne had promised to present the wife of the latest South African wonder, and the lady and her husband were engaged to dine with her the following week. Cœlia was fascinated in spite of the protest of every individual inch of her. She was, in fact, soon bound hand and foot to the victorious chariot of Jill; and Jill's spirits soared to superb heights. For, with all the ideality of which she was capable trodden in the dust, the shrewd practicality of Jill and her grim humour grew and soared. Movement was necessary to her. She must move in some direction. In her restless, unwholesome mood the direction mattered but little. To move was a necessity of her being. Fred grew daily more absorbed in his own affairs—more self-sufficing, more exasperating—and she more lonely. Besides, Cœlia could be of immense advantage to Jerry and Nell; and so long as things were done gently and subtly, in persistently

low tones, what did it matter if Cœlia, in dancing to her piping, did cut some fantastic figures? To see so discreet a figure in its unconscious relaxation gave to life a new zest, and prevented one's thinking of things. And throughout Jerry benefited enormously, while she herself could still be indispensable to some one.

A gnawing worm of dissatisfaction with every one, more especially herself, made Jill at this period, in her wayward, unexpected way, fairly divine as a house-mate.

Fred went about his business happy and proud.

And then one morning Jill awoke up so tired that she was forced into lying still for the first time for many weeks, whereupon she had to think, and in her racking, head-long, clear-seeing way, she plunged sheer upon the outrageous want of breeding apparent in her latest behaviour. It seemed impossible, unspeakable, incomprehensible. When she thought of Fred and his terrifying trust in her, she cowered together. To be despised by Fred must be rather like the bitter withering up of death.

The vulgarity hadn't even been honest and reckless. It had been a sort of spasm foreign to her nature. It had been fatally characteristic, however, in its methods, subtle and soft, sweet and clever and mean.

To spend oneself in vain regrets seemed a useless pursuit, however, the solution to nothing. Jill got up, put on her quietest clothes, drove across to Cœlia's, and behaved with such ineffable benignity that Lady Alleyne, although seriously annoyed at being disturbed in the morning, a period she devoted to domestic concerns and the improvement of her mind, forgave her visitor, was prepared to condone a multitude of trangressions, and felt really concerned.

Jill, grave, wistful, and with a striving-towards-righteousness look about her, could only be explained by two hypotheses. Either Jill had been doing something flagrantly foolish, and needed her help, or else she must certainly be going to die when her baby was born. So moved was Cœlia that she went the length of recommending her own nurse upon that trying

occasion. Jill was all meek acquiescence, and asked some questions that fairly thrilled with an ignorance unspeakably genuine. She had hitherto dismissed the subject with what Cœlia could only regard as a pagan and unprincipled smile.

Having started her course of repentance upon Cœlia, Jill cancelled a dozen engagements. She could not possibly go out to smile and beck, feeling all horrid and smirched. It would have been a slight upon Fred—like wearing a soiled and torn petticoat beneath a splendid gown. For the same reason she denied herself to all comers.

Fred came in to find her seated sadly beside a lonely tea-table.

"Why, this is delightful," he cried. "And you look different. Is that a new gown?"

"It's been worn out under your nose, dear," she said plaintively.

"Oh, it's a new lamp being just lit up in your face, then. Thank heaven, although your face is dancing with lights, they are soft and pleasant; instead of dazzling, they show us the road. I have just been talking to Alleyne Hood. I'm glad he likes you. I have hardly seen him since we left Oxford. We spent the morning picking up threads and talking of you. There are several ways of speaking of women, even to their husbands, but there's only one right way. They all fall into it directly they mention your name."

Jill turned her hot face towards the window.

"Especially Lord Kendrick," she said, laughing a little.

"Ah, he's the necessary exception. Aren't you going to give me any tea?"

Since she was of an age to repent, Jill's periods of repenting had been as sincere as they were violent, and always tried her hard. Now she felt shattered; she would have liked to die then and there, with Fred praising her. Partly to enjoy the odd prick of splendid renunciation in the sensation, partly to keep back her silly tears, directly Jill poured out the tea she shut her eyes, and lay back in her chair. She looked curiously young and helpless.

Jill helpless! It was a revelation to her long-suffering husband. With slow enjoyment he drank in the refreshing spectacle.

"It must be brutal," he said, his eyes still resting upon her, "for a man to be forced into feeling ashamed of his wife, even in the little things. Stanley's wife has put out Alleyne a lot. I don't suppose there's much wrong really. She tolerates her husband amiably enough, so I'm given to understand, but the woman's consuming vanity, her restlessness and craving for excitement and power, have made her lose all sense of good breeding. One wonders where she got her vulgarity. It's a cowardly sort of outrage upon a man like Stanley, who has the misfortune to take things seriously, and could no more stoop to make excuses for his wife than he could for himself. It's especially inexcusable in Mrs. Stanley, for she's a clever woman. A man who marries a fool must be prepared to forgive all that he can't understand, unless he's a fool himself, when he won't care, nor in that case, indeed, does it matter."

Never before had Jill heard her husband breathe a word against any woman, or listen to one. She stirred in her seat; visions vivid with life floated up to accuse and confound her. Had Mrs. Stanley ever been half so vulgar as herself at Cœlia's two days ago, to the delight of an appreciative many, and the naïve mystification of a few? If only she could tell Fred everything, and begin again!

"Jill, how young you look, and how tired? Are you so tired, child?"

"No," she said faintly. "It's the day."

He altered the light and began to fan her.

"By the way, I am rather amused at the friendship Alleyne has struck up with Jerry. It's odd, considering that a City man used to be a red rag to him. However, there's a lot of the woman about Alleyne. He can hug the offender and hate the offence with the best of you. To mention a company promoter is still to let loose thunder. How did the friendship start? Were you at the bottom of it? Hullo! What's up now?"

Jill was sitting bolt upright, fell purpose in all her mien. Involuntarily Fred sighed. But no power on earth could any longer hold his wife silent. How to tell the abominable truth was her one burning thought. If she began to bewail herself, or put the miserable thing in the form of a confession, she could never get it said at all with Fred's eyes searching her. She would just tell him everything in the usual way—a way flippant, no doubt, and reprehensible, but when her heart was in it, at least graphic and alive.

Forthwith barbed arrows, all pointed at her own breast, flew like leaves in the wind. Before she had half finished, Fred's hands slackened on the fan, his face altered.

"You're not well," he said, at last slowly. "Your imagination has run away with you. It is impossible for me to believe what you tell me."

"What right have you to refuse to believe me? You've known me ever since I was born. Have I ever made any pretence to simpering perfection?"

"I've never yet known you to be underbred or disloyal. It's not in your nature, in its normal state, to be either. I refuse to believe that you could lay yourself out to make a good woman, who is being of real advantage to your friends, ridiculous in her own house."

"If you only value your absolutely absurd ideal of me!"

"I have never found it necessary to idealise you, Jill. I value you for what you are. Alleyne told me to-day that Mrs. de Salis told him you had been the best influence in all his wife's unhappy childhood. He told me that the very first time he met you he knew she spoke the truth."

"Ah, you value me just in proportion as—as improving people speak well of me——"

"I can't listen to the best woman I have ever known insulting herself," he said gently. "And oh, Jill, now you're also insulting your little child."

"Oh, you're an immense vault; one gets lost in you. You freeze up one's natural feelings. Not to give me even the chance of repenting!"

"Oh, my dearest, repent as much as you like in any general sort of way you like, but not of meanness. Women's sins don't lie whatever their virtues may do."

"Would you hate me, then, if I did a—a low thing?"

"You could not do a low thing."

"You're Lucifer in the flesh! I always said it."

"I have yet to learn that Lucifer's fall had anything to do with his pride in his wife. So magnificent an egoist could never have had a wife."

"Oh, how different a woman is! A woman can forgive anything."

"But not in any one."

Of a sudden Fred's eyes shone a little. Jill was breathless. The Stephen look was hovering on the brink; but it died off. He flushed instead, and looked down.

"If, for instance, you found that I had done a shabby, paltry, disloyal thing to another man, could you forgive me so very easily?"

"But you couldn't. How—how dare you even suggest such a thing?" cried Jill, her eyes blazing.

"But that's just what I'm contending. Do you expect me to believe a thing in you I couldn't credit in myself. And oh, Jill, we can never think of you as we may of ourselves. It's—it's like lifting up one's eyes to the everlasting hills," he said shyly, "when a man thinks of his wife. You can't root it out of us, dear."

"If—if you'd believe me now, and—understand," said Jill, with a passionate white face, "everything in the whole world would be quite—quite different."

"Yes, it would be quite different."

Fred spoke in an odd hollow tone.

"You can forgive when you like. You like Mrs. de Salis. You let me be with her. She's not an angel. She, too, had an immaculate husband."

"Her husband was a tepid cad who never had it in him to believe in any woman. He had his wife watched systematically by his sisters from the day he brought her back from her

honeymoon. During the honeymoon he watched her himself. Mrs. de Salis was once very foolish; she could never be either mean or ungenerous. It is not fair to bring her in. Supposing for a moment that the story you've just told me, Jill, had been fact, not the morbid exaggeration of an absurd, over-scrupulous conscience, and an over-tired poor little body," said Fred, with infinite tenderness, "would you have first hustled a friend into doing favours to people she would prefer not to know, and then have befooled her before an acute audience in gratitude for her kindness, if Mrs. de Salis had been looking on?"

"Mrs. de Salis, as it happened, is out of town. I don't understand you. Not five minutes ago you laughed at Lord Alleyne's friendship for Jerry."

"Then it only seemed due to your good-nature. One grows confused under the fires of your imagination, child. Now the thing—if I were to believe you—would look wholly different. It would look like an organised plan to rob honest people of an immense influence which may lead to immense wrong in the hands of the man who holds it. Jerry is meddling, I am afraid, with forces too big for his handling. He may be driven into a corner. No man can prophesy of another what means he may not use to get out of a corner. It would be disastrous for all of us if he were to use Alleyne."

The outlook was a gulf of outer darkness. Jill slid back from it to herself.

"To pretend to know *me*, and in the same breath speak of everlasting hills!" she murmured.

Fred flushed.

"You're quite right. There are things of which one ought not to speak. But I shall always *think* of you in connection with them."

"*You* not to know how horrid I can be?" she pleaded.

"Far be it from me to make little of your rare power of being horrid, my dearest. If I did, you wouldn't be Jill. There are so many wholesome ways of being horrid; you have an ample range, dear, but your power of selection is admirable."

"You don't know how to do justice to a woman."

"It's just the one thing I do know how to do. But so few women know how to do justice to themselves. Why, whenever you——"

"Oh, if only I had the chance. If I wasn't treated as a sacred relic or a white elephant, and thwarted at every step, and my life made a torment! What right have you to demand too much? Can't one ever stumble?"

"Oh, Jill, if you never stumbled, where should I be? But you would inevitably stumble in the right direction."

"Don't quote those wretched hills again! They give me a headache. To look blood-curdling and harp on everlasting hills when one is—is lonely! If you'd loved me—oh, if you'd loved me, you'd love me up hill and down."

By this time Fred, tired to the bone, was only too ready to feel guilty. If there was real blame anywhere, it must surely be his. Loneliness even in an ordinary woman was a thing of which no man likes to think. But Jill lonely! There was hard, stupendous tragedy in the vista.

As for any thought of disillusion entering into Fred's heart he would have throttled it for a traitor in the gates.

Only too ready to be persuaded, he persuaded himself that he must have been in some way or other a brute, thus to let things go.

"I'm not fit to have the care of you, dear," he said sadly. "I'm uncouth, unadaptable. I've had a bad training for"—"this sort of thing" was on the tip of his honest tongue, but he changed it to—"married life, and really believe I've been neglecting you. But we'll begin again and go out more together——"

"Oh dear me! You think I'm exacting further sacrifices on your part. Can't you understand? Must I explain again?"

"My only Jill, I don't think your explanations bring us any further. I'm hopelessly old-fashioned and sentimental, as you know. Let me find out things for myself. I always have done so. I'm slow, dear, but I generally arrive in the end——"

"If you don't arrive till I am an old woman," said Jill tragically, "and then only to arrive at the truth! You won't be so lenient, perhaps, when I am toothless."

"Oh, Jill! Jill!"

He was beginning to feel scarred all over, and he had a great deal to do. At this moment a telegram was brought in. Fred seized it joyfully. No mortal man but will welcome any interruption to any crisis, however emotional, so long as he can see no definite end to it. A woman thoroughly wound up will wander round a maze till she drops.

"Whether we like it or not," said Fred, with a new gravity in his voice, "we must cease this unprofitable discussion. One of the gamekeepers, a fine fellow with a young wife and two little children, has been shot in a most unaccountable way. I must catch the next train."

"Oh, Fred, I'm sorry. I wonder—I wonder if I might go to the poor wife——"

"Jill! my poor little Jill!"

In a flash Jill saw herself at her best, an elevating spectacle that Fred would also be privileged to behold. It might alter everything! She was so sorrowful, so stricken, she could comfort a lost soul, not to say a poor little widow. But in her maddest moments Jill was not entirely lost to reason. She knew that her going was out of the question. She felt, moreover, that no man, however great, could quite understand all the manifold roots to her misery and the tortures they were both enduring. She swallowed a bitter tear and went to give directions about Fred's portmanteau, flask, and sandwich case. He would be certain to forget to dine.

"Jill, you'll rest, won't you?" said Fred, when he had tumbled hastily into a light suit.

"Rest! Oh yes, certainly I'll rest," she said drearily; "but it must be in my own way."

Rest—with all she had to do! She felt as though she never could rest again.

Fred sighed as he got into the waiting hansom. He now

often found himself wondering if that miserable affair with Jerry had not wholly killed Jill's power of loving, and if to such death there is any resurrection. To love, and serve, and believe were very part and parcel of Fred, but he was famishing for want of hope.

CHAPTER XXX

HER mind fixed firmly to repentance, and possessed of an insatiable desire to undo some of the evil for which she had so gaily paved the way, Jill sat down to collect her wits, but finding this impossible, she ordered a cab and set forth upon a mission.

The only one amongst all her potential powers that Jill had ever underrated was that over her husband. That she was not quite equal to holding Jerry, or the like of him, in the palm of her hand never entered her head. The far-reaching, all-pervading business instinct which underlay much of Jerry's gaiety it would not have been in her nature to understand.

She distrusted Jerry in a vague way, with a will, else she would not have been so ready to prop him up. But it was his weakness of which she was afraid, never of his strength. His intelligent and enlightened appreciation of the commercial uses to which the very wide and affluent circle into which she had so adroitly propelled him might be put, was so unfamiliar a family trait that to be grasped in its entirety it required some consecutive thinking. And in the excitement of dancing to the clash of her own cleverness as she improved the position of her friends; twisted the prim perfection of Cœlia into strange knots; amused an appreciative audience, and generally blotted out thought, many things escaped Jill, more especially honour and reason.

That her fantastic dance could lead to real harm had never especially struck Jill until Fred had spoken. Then, in her sore, exaggerated state of mind, words swelled to

great glaring facts, hills into mountains. She could see Jerry, —whose fatal gift in persuading people against their better judgment, now that she paused to think of it, beat itself into her in hard little blows—making Alleyne Hood the figure-head upon a score of nefarious companies, the jibe of a bitter press, the byword of the best clubs. She quailed before the abominable vision. She felt that had she not been so absorbed in making his wife ridiculous, she could now be cordially liking this kindly man, who had praised her to Fred.

To have felt proud of being praised by a man who adored Cœlia, bullocks, and mangel-wurzels with the same impassive smile would, not three hours ago, have amused Jill immensely. But Fred's face, as he repeated the adulation, could make any praise fairly divine.

Jill sat bolt upright in the cab that was conveying her in search of Jerry, and smiled upon the jaded Fleet Street wayfarers like an angel.

The smile fairly transfixed Eveleen Brooke, who, seated in Lord Kendrick's big carriage, was also stopped in a block in the centre of this unfashionable thoroughfare. The horses' heads were, however, turned Westward. Jill, on the contrary, was making her brazen way towards the East.

"Good gracious! Jill Morton, your nephew's wife, going at this hour to the City!" gasped Eveleen.

"Dear me! dear me!" fumed her escort. "Where—where can she be going?"

Eveleen was now quite calm.

"Going? Why, surely, to Mr. Devereux's office."

"I wish—I wish my nephew's wife would use her own carriage."

"It is wiser, possibly upon her part, sometimes to take a cab."

"Her husband is away," he faltered, his eyes shifting nervously, "upon that sad business of which I have been telling you."

"In that case—in that case, my dear Lord Kendrick,

would it not be your duty to see what Mrs. Morton means to do? There, she's gone. We can turn down that street and get through by the Embankment."

"I have no wish to—to police my nephew's wife," he pleaded rather pathetically. Lord Kendrick had often poignant glimmerings of high and lofty things.

"My dear friend. Police! You are her natural guardian in her husband's absence."

"Her husband has some very fixed notions about—about Cæsar's wife——"

"An untried child, unsoftened by suffering, unsanctified by religion, and eaten up with vanity," said Eveleen, with sweet, sad finality, "cannot, I fear, be accorded the full privileges of a Cæsar's wife. Besides, a Cæsar's wife, we must remember, was born to her position."

Lord Kendrick bridled.

"My niece-in-law's family is not entirely obscure."

"No, dear Lord Kendrick; but then, being Irish—— I never met an Irishman yet who was not more or less of an earl."

Eveleen's pedigree comprised three uneventful bishops. She felt she had a right, therefore, to be critical. No blight of Irish imagination had ever fallen upon her respectable tree to blister its circumspect trunk into vain swellings. What she was she was. Humble, she would admit, with superb insolence, but she could prove it, if necessary, by bell, book, and candlestick.

As she was thinking all this, Eveleen looked so mildly impressive that she became more firmly impressed than ever, as a last resource, upon the pious, though cautious, breast of her discreet admirer.

"Oh, Lord Kendrick, how they will miss your opening address! This—this is true self-denial."

When interrupted by the more urgent necessity of tracking Jill they had all been bound to a meeting for the conversion of the Jews, in a noted Portman Square mansion.

A fat, immovable bundle, upholstered in silk and jet, beside

Eveleen, sighed heavily, as though recalled to a meek attempt at her normal torpid existence. This was Eveleen's chaperon, a pathetic barricade against dangers now long past.

"This neighbourhood is quite new to me," she bleated dreamily. "I thought I knew every drawing-room in London in which sound doctrine was expounded."

"This is the City, dear aunty. Lord Kendrick has important business here which cannot wait. We shall go later to the meeting."

The lady uttered a resigned gurgle, and relapsed into contented inaction.

Ten minutes afterwards Lord Kendrick knocked softly at the door of Jerry's private office, and, receiving no answer, assumed the privilege of a connection, opened the door and stepped softly in.

Jill's small face, no longer smiling, looked whitely up at Jerry. Jerry, with his hand on the back of her chair, was explaining many things with much eloquence.

Jill had not vouchsafed so much as a thought to the conventional seemliness in her enterprise; but with one look at Lord Kendrick all the impropriety with which it simply bristled seemed to strike her fair in the face. She saw her verdict written in stone commandments upon Lord Kendrick's inexorable face.

Every nerve on the rack, tired, miserable, with defeat in sight, Jill lost her head and plunged madly into explanations. Lord Kendrick cut her short with a pitiless locked face, lifting his hands in deprecation.

"My dear child! my dear child! Fred's hurried departure no doubt has caused your visit. Could I not have been of some use to you?"

Jill looked at him for a minute mute and weary; then she roused herself.

"You know quite well that Fred's going away has nothing to do with my being here. And you know that by the suggestion, which you don't believe, you're accusing me of [redacted] things you daren't put into words. One look at you is enough

—and—anything I can say to defend myself would make things worse, with you resolved not to understand," she said, in a dull tone of hopelessness.

"Mrs. Morton—— " broke in Jerry quietly.

"Oh, don't! What's the use? Look at Lord Kendrick. He's making a matter of conscience of it. When any one begins to think vile things on principle——"

"There's no question of vile things, Jill," said Jerry, still contained and coherent. "When you came in, Lord Kendrick, Mrs. Morton was just telling me that Fred is afraid that I may make unworthy use of some influential people to whom Mrs. Morton was kind enough to introduce my wife and me. Mrs. Morton was anxious to let me know this at once, and thus prevent any mischief resulting from her kindness. Any one who understands Mrs. Morton need not be surprised at the haste in her actions. She is not a woman who could go to sleep until she had remedied any supposed wrong she had done. As it happens, fortunately, no harm has been done or intended. I am extremely sorry to have been the unconscious cause of any anxiety to Mrs. Morton. Although, indeed, Mrs. Morton's visit, even from other points of view, is not so very astonishing after all; for, you must be aware, Lord Kendrick, that the City has an unfortunate habit of precipitating the most level-headed of women into panics."

Jill looked at him, and every glib word he spoke seemed only to accentuate her folly in a hundred things. How foolish she had been—how foolish!—and out of her foolishness there seemed to be no road. Explanations would do nothing but harm to the ears of a deaf adder. She glanced drearily at Fred's uncle. Then all at once she knew that unless she could get hold of some one warm and human, save only Jerry, any one to lean upon, something impossible would be happening. Jerry being outside the pale, suddenly she sprang up and caught hold of Lord Kendrick's arm.

"Jerry has put it very nicely," she said, with an odd little laugh, a laugh like a sob, "and it's quite true, but you don't believe a word of what either of us say. Did you come

because you thought you ought to for Fred's sake—to be of service to Fred? If you did—if you really did—— Oh, but I see you didn't, you came to—to confound me—to catch me hot-handed in—in sin. Lord Kendrick, look at me! Look close—closer. Unless you're blind, principle or not, you couldn't believe—in your heart—that I could do any real wrong to Fred. You're persuading yourself into believing anything. Just look at me—me, and don't think of any one else. You'd never have believed I could do evil if it hadn't been put into your head in a way to make it sound religious."

She pinched his rigid arm excitedly. Lord Kendrick groaned aloud.

"I should gladly believe all good of my nephew's wife——"

"Putting it like that makes one simply powerless."

She paused, wondering what part of this business she could make look better by the categorical explanation his cold eyes seemed to be trying to screw out of her. Could she explain that she had gone to Nell's house to find Nell's husband; that Nell had offered eagerly to accompany her to the office, where Jerry had gone in search of some papers, failing this, had begged her to await Jerry's return comfortably in a cool drawing-room; that, with inexorable gentleness, she had refused both very natural requests? How could she explain that she couldn't possibly let Jerry's wife see her utter distrust in Jerry, or Fred's distrust in him, when her one object was to glorify Jerry in the eyes of trustful Nell? Moreover, how could she betray Jerry into the hand of this righteous person by dilating upon his concerns, and her concern in regard to them? It was a misty web of horrid suspicion. The one single thing left her to do was to wrap it in silence.

Lord Kendrick moved and murmured. She must say something. As a preliminary she put her face even nearer to his. He was a little slim man; their faces were now at a most embarrassing level.

"The foolishness in the whole——"

"Ah, foolishness—yes. Don't speak of it. Am I not suffering enough for my foolishness? Oh, if you only knew!"

His nervous, unhelpful eyes; his tremulous restiveness under her touch; the signs of relenting about his weak mouth; the arm driven hither and thither by the divers emotions in her grasp, relaxing and stiffening; the open fight going on in the shallow soul, sapped Jill's courage.

But she clung tight. This reed of an arm had at least some of the good blood of Fred in it. It could not fail her altogether; if only she persevered and had strength to hold on, it must help her in the end. To encourage herself she searched the narrow face of her victim for one single trace of Fred, and sighed.

Lord Kendrick experienced the unpleasant sensation as of a noble animal being baited.

"If you will but explain," he faltered.

"I can explain nothing to any one but Fred. He—he will be angry, disappointed, miserable, but he'll be satisfied."

At the astonishing contradictions in the statement, the long face lengthened, the arm jerked.

"Can't you see that to distrust me is to insult Fred?" demanded Jill.

"I fail to see it."

"A—ah!"

She dropped his arm.

"I must wait, then."

She paused, and tried to gather in her confused thoughts.

Lord Kendrick seized a little black bag containing tracts and other small impedimenta as though it were a buckler of defence.

"I have missed a most important engagement to see if I could in any sort of way be of assistance to you, Mrs. Morton. I must ascertain if there is not yet time at least to explain my absence."

Jill awoke from her horrid abstraction, looked out at the lamps, and shivered suddenly.

"Oh, how late it is! I've never been out so late before in London alone. Will you send away the cab and take me with you? It—it will be better for Fred," she said, with a quick break in her voice.

She looked very young. The touch, the clutch, rather, of her hand upon his arm had thrilled him in spite of himself. Her personal appeal to himself softened him oddly. He paused, and in the pause in bounced the image of Eveleen, aloof, calm, mutely smiling.

Eveleen's smile could cut sharper than a two-edged sword. Lord Kendrick, woman-bred, sensitive, nervous, vain, could endure many things, but ridicule was death to him.

Facts were facts. The future—who could fathom it? The octopus-like arms of the Divorce Court seemed now to gather prey from the most unexceptional houses.

"As we sow so shall we reap."

"Shall a fool escape the consequences of his folly?"

"The company of fools shall be destroyed."

Every pertinent proverb Solomon ever uttered seemed to rush miraculously to the gentleman's strengthening.

A hundred past flippancies of Jill's, reckless darts cast in order to flout the estimable woman whom he designed to make his wife, rushed in hot on their heels.

"Since I cannot be of any advantage to you, my dear young lady; since you deprive me of any further excuse for interfering upon your behalf, and, indeed, bitterly resent my futile, though well-meant, attempt to be of real service to you, I must now consider others. I fear it will be impossible for me to drive you home. In fact, I have no room in my carriage."

"You—you won't take me home?" said Jill, in a dreary, vague voice.

"Mrs. Morton isn't well enough to go home alone, Lord Kendrick. Surely that's plain enough."

"I'm quite well. Only I don't like going home alone, and it's absolutely certain that in the circumstances, Jerry, you can't take me. It's mawkish, really, to mind. Perhaps it's because I'm so tired. It's so absurd to be tired in this sort of way, Lord Kendrick," she said, partly to give herself time; "it's wicked waste of time to try to make the way of transgressors harder than—the thing itself makes them? It's—it's bad

political economy. For the sake of the cabman you'll at least put me into the cab, Lord Kendrick, won't you."

He muttered some feeble and indistinguishable rejoinder, for indeed he was feeling curiously moved by the entreaty of so sweet and bright a creature. They were now at the top of the tier of steps. She paused to look down them; they seemed so long. Could she ever, ever get to the bottom? Of a sudden she spied Eveleen in the carriage, erect, calm, expectant.

All Jill's tiredness slid off as by a miracle. She felt alive again. She fetched up and laughed softly. Lord Kendrick halted beside her helplessly. By this time he had a nether millstone around either side of his neck. At one side Eveleen, at the other Jill. He felt weighed to the ground.

Jill turned her vivid, quick face up to his sheep-like visage.

"Miss Brooke," she cried. "So it's been Miss Brooke from beginning to end—Miss Brooke and the padded chamber?" Jill glanced at the silken bundle. "I always think of her as that. I rather think there's a good deal of padded chamber in all true evangelical Christianity. It preserves itself so carefully from the onslaughts and appeals of unquickened souls and disturbed intellects. You oughtn't to have refused to take me home, Lord Kendrick. Still, I'm glad it was love and not inhumanity—Miss Brooke, how good of you to make Lord Kendrick come to see what particular sin I was committing! But he wanted a little more coaching. Shepherds in the Bible always carried the stray lambs home in their bosoms. I don't want to presume so far as that, but I think he might have managed to tuck me into the corner of his carriage. I can't do anything right to-day," said Jill, thrusting a smiling face out of her cab. "What I ought to have done was to have slipped into your carriage without comment, and forced you into doing right by Fred. Eveleen will lead you an awful life, dear Lord Kendrick," she cooed. "I sincerely hope that some day I may be sorry."

When the cabman drew up at Jill's flat in Charles Street,

and proceeded to flourish open his door he found himself opposed by some unexpected obstruction. Upon examination he ascertained that his pretty young fare had fainted apparently, and in falling had got huddled up against the door.

CHAPTER XXXI

JUST as the dawn broke Fred arrived, having ridden thirty mad miles across a wild country to catch a late excursion train. Jill lay softly moaning, and the little heir to the Kendrick virtues and acres, having said all he had to say in one wailing protest against the infinite sadness of a cold world, shut his eyes and died. Mental shock the doctors gave as the cause of all the trouble, and some injury she must have received when she had fallen. But Jill knew nothing; she only moaned softly. Nell stole upstairs, and her tears over the dead baby washed out of her gentle heart for ever her bitterness towards its unconscious mother.

Jerry, downstairs, wrung Fred's hand dumbly and was a boy again. Presently Lord Kendrick tottered in, an old man broken and full of fear. But no one told Fred the story of that strange evening, and he asked no questions. If there was anything to be told, it was for Jill alone to tell it. Knowing that he detested Jill heartily, Fred wondered indeed a little at the extent of emotion displayed by his uncle, at the text driven back from his lips, at his scared ineptitude. Then he remembered that it was probably Jill's soul that moved him, and smiled strangely in the old man's face. Weary, haggard, in despair, Fred soon dismissed the subject. He wanted nothing now, nothing but the life of his young wife. And day by day, in his patient, uncomplaining, unswerving way, he strove fiercely with God for his treasure.

When the dumbness of deadly fatigue at last broke down, Jill raved softly, and, in spite of her wildness, with some wit concerning bogus companies and the weakness of man. Her

mind was, however, too nimble to be confined within the narrow precincts of the City. It skimmed like a will-o'-the-wisp through a thousand flippancies. She threw delicate winged shafts at Cœlia and laughed with wicked glee. She flouted Cœlia's protests with adorable womanly gentleness; she bewitched Cœlia's husband, but invariably she flew back to the City and Jerry.

More than once Fred put one hand over her mouth, and with the other he hid his face. Her synopsis of City life made his blood curdle, and in this there was more, surely, than the workings of fever upon an Irish imagination. Jill's mind to be dominated by such tawdry iniquity! She babbled, he noticed, of Jerry, but rarely mentioned him. Once when he was watching her she awoke with a start and fixed her relentless, vacant eyes upon his face, then clutched the sheet with her hands convulsively, and her cry rang wailing through the lofty room.

"Oh, Fred! Fred! Fred!"

To his tortured senses the cry held all the sadness of all the ages. Then she curled up upon herself and cried till she slept. When she awoke she struggled up on the pillow and laughed and cackled until Fred put his hands to his shocked ears.

"Fred's inside's lined with a tablet of stone, and all the commandments on it," she chuckled. "How uncomfortable it must be for his poor inside, and me—me to be always feeling like a fly on the dome of St. Paul's. I wonder—I wonder what the dome thinks of the fly. Poor, poor, poor little fly! Oh, I wonder——" she murmured off into a wild medley of words, and her voice would have moved a stone.

Fred was privileged to learn a good deal in regard to the intensity of his wife's emotions. Where he came in amongst them was perhaps less clear.

By the time Jill was out of danger there were so many other things of which he had to think that he found it more convenient to thrust himself as usual into the background and think of Jill.

He was terribly anxious as to the effect of her child's death upon her, but so far she had given no sign, save that of a white face and absolute silence.

For himself he was bitterly disappointed. The loss of the child was a deep grief to him. Moreover he had grown to love every inch of the Kendrick acres. They and the people upon them had come largely into his life. He would have liked dearly to teach a son of his own right from the beginning to handle land and people.

Jill, as a mother, might have solved many a problem and smoothed his path. The heir would have lifted off for ever the one doubt that shadowed his path, and would permanently have cleared his horizon.

His uncle's attitude also gave cause for some little thought. Lord Kendrick's first horrified anxiety for Jill, directly her safety was assured, had given place to shrinking aloofness.

It struck Fred that for some inexplicable reason his uncle was rather ashamed of himself, and in order to correct the untoward sensation fortified himself by airs of a righteous and justifiable resentment; which, indeed, was precisely the case.

Had Jill died Lord Kendrick would undoubtedly have believed himself to be in a great measure accountable for the tragedy. Eveleen's insistent and somewhat noisy Evangelicism would in that case have been its own executioner. He would have permitted himself to remember that she had once worn a cross.

Since, however, Jill lived, the groaning of an unappeased conscience became Eveleen's best ally. It was an entirely new sensation to Lord Kendrick. He could not endure it unaided. To be able to see himself in the right light was a necessity of his being, the privilege of his kind.

To review past events, therefore, in the companionship of one who knew the facts—more or less, but could yet exonerate him from all blame in his dealings with them, became a fixed habit with Lord Kendrick. After a fortnight's treatment in the skilful hands of Eveleen the death of Jill's baby acted upon him as tinder upon flint.

He felt himself now fully justified in a final resolve to resist the wiles of the froward, and take upon his own shoulders all the magnificent burthens of a spotless name.

The very day Jill came downstairs Lord Kendrick was married privately, but as thoroughly as a Bishop and a Dean could do it, to Eveleen Brooke. She had decided from the first that the deed should be done before Jill had time to make it ridiculous. Once done, no ridicule could undo it.

Meanwhile Jill's recovery was being retarded and hampered by her unsatisfied anxiety as to Jerry's doings.

That unspeakable hour in Jerry's office had filled her with dreadful forebodings. For the first time in her life she had got out of her depth in Jerry. She had been afraid of Jerry, not for him. Was she, after all, to fail in everything, with every one?

And in this matter she could ask Fred nothing. Nor if she had could he have understood. If he had failed in tracking her windings, how could he be expected to follow those of Jerry?

Wondering what Jerry was doing, and in how far she was responsible for his deeds, kept Jill busy by day. At night her thoughts all flew softly to the baby she had never seen and all the time she was getting ready to tell Fred all the things that had led to its dying.

Thus, full of these engrossing reflections, she saw nothing so very disturbing in Lord Kendrick's marriage. It seemed to her a foregone conclusion. Fred's grave silence in the matter rather surprised her.

She laughed and mocked a little at the grotesqueness in the affair, and went back to the more urgent subject of Jerry's increasing intimacy with Alleyne, with herself lying useless and idle in bed.

But at last she got well, and an hour after she got downstairs Lawrence Devereux came in.

He had of late fallen into the habit of treating Jill as an equal in a calm and reasonable judgment upon men and matters.

Now the cynical and obvious disappointment in his manner as he discussed the marriage, the good-humoured disapproval in his shrewd eyes, opened Jill's each moment wider.

"You look amazingly well," said Lawrence, in his light bantering way; "handsomer than ever I've seen you. I don't think therefore that a few plain truths can hurt you. As no one else seems to be assuming any authority in the dispensing of them, suppose I do?"

"What—what do you mean?"

"Your conduct, as you must perceive, has at last forced that poor old dotard into matrimony and an heir."

"Oh, dear me!"

"My good child, you seem startled. Don't flatter yourself. I've known Eveleen Brooke for thirty-five years, and I know that she's equal to anything. You may count your chances of being a countess as nil. What! that doesn't trouble you? It's pretty hard lines on Fred, though. What does he say?"

Jill was looking at him vaguely.

"Nothing," she said in a toneless voice.

"You've got hold of an admirable Crichton in that young fellow."

Jill's bowed head lifted as though moved by a spring.

"To compare Fred to that prig!"

Captain Devereux threw a slantwise, sharp glance at her.

"That's how it is, is it?" he thought swiftly.

"If you'd give him half a chance, he'd be a genius. I never look at Fred but I think of that unfortunate fellow Carlyle."

"Do you think I'd grow bitter if I had to scrub Fred's floors?"

"On the contrary. Your activity takes another form. When you'd finished scrubbing Fred's floors you'd want to be at Fred himself. My dear child, I've been observing you with immense interest."

"Oh! To see how bad I could be! Every one seems to be occupied in that interesting occupation. I'm beset with faithful friends."

"No one could dream of—conscious evil where you are

about, my dear girl, but wherever you appear you have an effect. We all have expectations when we see you—spiced possibilities with the merest dash of forbidden fruit in them."

Jill threw up her hands with a passionate gesture.

"Because I'm not a bad imitation of a grocer's wife—the lineal descendant of the creature who wore a wreath of roses. What can you expect of men when the ideal of any man could be that Huguenot thing who wanted to betray her lover into dishonour with a white rag?"

"A charming, unaffected girl, she has always seemed to me, with natural instincts! I notice that directly women grow transcendental they're apt to play odd pranks with the higher moralities."

"Failure isn't everything," she cried plaintively.

"Failure is so vague a term," he said dreamily, in a soft voice. "To fail in being a good wife surely means a great deal. To disappoint yourself in the attainment of some goal set up by an undisciplined imagination," proceeded Lawrence, with benignant encouragement, "means merely feeling your feet—" he paused—"occasionally may mean bringing a woman to her senses. I have known the pains consequent upon the experience put to most excellent uses."

"Cousin Lawrence——"

He put up his hands pleadingly.

"My dear child, give me two minutes! I've known you since you were in your cradle and suffered from you! Even then your individuality had an aggressive way with it. Men, I assure you, delight in a woman's individuality, but they prefer it—well, under bit and bridle." He glanced at Jill's eyes and hastily went on, deprecation in all his mien. "Suppose, my dearest girl, you let your own individuality rest a little—it must surely need a rest—and occupy the interval in taking an intelligent interest in Fred's. That neglected quantity will, I promise you, grow on you at such a rate that presently, when you find time to resume the contemplation of your own, you'll find it in sheer

sympathy grown and glorified to such an extent that you'll hardly recognise it."

Jill, contrary to her usual custom, choked audibly.

"If the tendency to astonish and dominate is ineradicable, then indeed you are lost in matrimony," he pursued, playing idly with his eyeglass. "You are reserved for the higher uses of a platform or an inverted tub." Lawrence put up his glasses. "You'd look magnificent, my child, prancing on a platform."

"Oh, you're abominably, hatefully, cruelly rude," cried Jill, with flaming cheeks, "but—but, in all my life I never liked you half so well before. But you—how can you——"

"Ah, you may well ask, although indeed you might have known. I have a good mother. One good woman makes a man know that the others cannot all be bad, that even the worst cannot be all bad."

"Ah, don't be yourself again for a minute. If you weren't, you might help me to think."

"For God's sake, stop thinking. At certain stages thinking's fatal to women. Can't you Be?"

"Oh, there it is—there's Buddha clattering about our ears again. In the heart of every right-thinking man every husband stands for Buddha. After all, there was only one Buddha while there are some millions of men. Besides, every husband isn't a mere suction pump. Some men like to worship on their own account."

"Men, my child, are profound, and many-sided egotists, and the processes of absorption and worship can go on quite comfortably at the same time. You just give a man his chance. It's in you yourself to get absolutely devoted to any object. You'd sacrifice yourself gaily upon any altar big enough to suit the demands of your inordinate imagination." Lawrence threw her a thoughtful glance. "I can see you being a superb martyr, your fine eyes blazing with joy as the flames lick your feet and tinge the western sky with rose. The worst is that a woman who would sacrifice herself comfortably for a man

or her religion, or a fad, upon any known and recognised altar, in her regret and disappointment at his failing to appreciate her putative powers will be just as ready to sacrifice him upon the shrine of her own thwarted vanity. Let me finish and fly," he supplicated. "Good intentions go for little in matrimony. What that parlous state requires is a little common sense. Make it possible for a man to do his best work without bothering his head about your succession of sensations while he's at it. That's the secret of a good wife. Good-bye, my child. By the way, take my advice and leave the commercial morality or immorality of Jerry in the hands of my little daughter-in-law. The thing's in her blood; she will know how to deal with it when the time comes, more wisely than we others could ever do."

"To hurl insults at me and then run away!"

"My darling child, I have not yet entered upon the period of senile decay. Thank God my rule in life has been from the beginning to fly before a woman's fire; it is too nimble and deadly for feeble man. *Au revoir*, my child."

"Now," said Lawrence, as soon as he was safe, "I believe I've acted for the first time in my life after my mother's own heart. But, by George, this violent sort of virtue is thirsty work."

When she found herself in good sooth alone, with an utter absence of affectation Jill gnashed her teeth.

Fred came in presently to find her with blazing cheeks and mystifying eyes reading Thomas à Kempis hard. He had just had a bad quarter of an hour at his club, where the marriage of his uncle was the latest fillip to polite conversation, and was feeling rather low.

Jill flounced up to him and peered into his startled countenance. No mortal power would induce her to betray Lord Kendrick's responsibility in her illness and her child's death to Fred, but she must say something.

"Fred, I feel such a beast. Are you dreadfully sorry about the little baby? Are you blaming me?"

"My dearest, no! You haven't been sitting here alone

worrying? Surely I saw Lawrence Devereux's back as I turned the corner?"

"Oh yes! You saw him. Oh, Fred, the meanness of your uncle in marrying just now—the meanness of it! It's atrocious of pronounced Christians to do such things. It makes it so difficult for one to believe in anything."

Of a sudden she broke off and primmed her lips, as though wild horses wouldn't draw another word from her.

With real concern Fred stared—those flushed cheeks, those shining eyes, this flare of distraught sentiment!

"My dear child," he said soothingly, "there's nothing against a Christian man's entering into lawful matrimony. Don't let that interfere with your faith."

"Some marriages are undertaken with the most fiendish of motives. Oh, Fred, you never could understand the wickedness of the world," said Jill oracularly; then she snapped her lips.

The mystic veils wherein women seem able to wrap themselves at a moment's notice always struck Fred dumb. Directly he could speak, to change the subject seemed the last hope. He now embarked upon a short story about a man and a maid.

Jill wondered how a genius could be so dense as not to see that there she was fairly choking with repentance. If only he'd speak of himself, let her rest in his nice grave, good thoughts or tell her of his anxieties. He was human, he must have cares. Fred, as it happened, would gladly have spoken about certain common-place causes of annoyance then harassing him, but in many ways he would always be a shy, overlooked boy. He had no gift of narrative. The things that could absorb him must seem so unsatisfactory to Jill. Her vivid impetuous eagerness drove him back upon himself, strangled spontaneity.

The storms now going on in her would lead no doubt at some future time to a beneficent calm. He understood his wife too little and rated her too high to venture to interfere in her making, howsoever the disturbing process might contribute to his own unmaking.

"Are these the things men speak about in their clubs?" said Jill, when the story was done. "They appear to take a nice intelligent interest in the young.—Fred, are you very sorry for the baby—as baby, not heir?" she said, her voice strangely soft. "Ah, I see you are! It's—it's so curious to be always wanting a little creature you never saw. Fred, do you think its death might have been a judgment?"

"A judgment? For what, Jill?" he said, his voice in his bewilderment grown stern. "Are you becoming morbid?"

"No, I'm not morbid. A judgment for being a fool. I don't want it to be a judgment—your own little child to be put to such a use! Perhaps instead it might have been a scapegoat to carry away all the foolishness—the idiocy. That would be rather nice. The baby wouldn't feel then as if it had missed everything and only brought sorrow. It must be awful to end in nothing but to be a giver of sorrow."

Her eyes were swimming in tears. Her voice was incredibly sweet; she was feeling something intensely. It was more than the death of her baby.

Since the first night of her illness and all the strange circumstances surrounding it of which she had never spoken, Fred's heart had been slowly but steadily failing him for fear, but in his stubborn faith he refused to believe in his fears, he forced his heart to lift itself up again to believe and to hope. Now it fell with a great thud. It was a stone in his breast that no faith could any longer lift up. This mystery of sorrow, then, was all for Jerry. The child was fighting all alone the lonely fight on a dreary battlefield wherein no man might help her, whereof no man must speak.

For an instant Fred's head fell upon his shoulders, the next he stood straight up and put his capable kind hands upon Jill's shoulders.

"Poor little Jill!" he said hoarsely, "poor little child!"

She shrunk away.

"Jill," he said, after a pause, "Grandmother Devereux must be all right again by this time. Why don't you ask her over?"

She paused and looked at him.

"Grandmother Devereux is rather like the day of judgment, and so are you. I'm not ready just now to live in the same house with two days of judgment. It's rather an overwhelming allowance, don't you think, for just one woman? Fred!" she cried out in sudden sharp passion, "why can't you get things right? Why on earth can't you help me?"

"The only possible way in which I can help you, dear," said Fred, flushing slowly, "is by believing in you utterly and absolutely."

CHAPTER XXXII

OBSTINATE in his resolve to leave Jill in her own hands, Fred took up all his burthens, and went forth silently upon his lonely way. Work seemed to be the one absolute satisfaction now left to him. He laboured on doggedly in a multitude of directions, and every stroke of work he did was to the point. Jill could see him growing. What was more, she could see his importance growing. She had ample opportunities for doing so.

For now for his pride's sake and hers Fred accompanied her everywhere; and every day she felt farther away from him, less able to fathom his baffling reticence, his quiet, solicitous care of her, his grave, half-amused tenderness to all her moods.

Besides being an abiding torture, Fred's presence was, however, a perennial inspiration. Under such a regal gaze who could be uncontrolled, or vulgar, or reckless, or anything but at one's best?

Jill grew quite uncannily sweet and delightful. Her amiability mystified all beholders. The deprecating apology present in her flashes of chastened wit was a revelation to many. The manner in which she restrained her tongue and her temper, together with the breathless expectation induced by occasional relapses into original sin, exhilarated a circle jaded by July.

The dramatic instinct inseparable from Jill's upward progress fairly forced her into dressing in character. Even her hats

began to partake of her general regeneration, and, instead of vivid contrasts, her gowns whispered softly in greys and heliotropes. She could manage by this time, moreover, by fixing her mind firmly upon Fred, to listen without revolt to Cœlia's lectures, and Cœlia, being now convinced that her example was at last really beginning to work, lost no opportunity of exercising it.

Jill, in her turn, was gently motherly and absent-minded with Nell, her thoughts being, under such circumstances, chiefly occupied with Jerry. The improvement in her conduct and bearing became, indeed, only really remarkable when in the society of Jerry. She was so anxious to get all the wrong she had done turned to right that she spared no pains. She put out all the better part of her; she chastened her smile, eschewed winged words, and wooed her tongue to sweetness, and all in order to convince Jerry of the beauty of holiness, even as applied to the City.

In the whole matter of Jerry, Jill could feel in her bones that she was shining with a new and beneficent light. Since she had resolved, whether he liked it or not, to sit at Fred's feet and learn of him, all her influence over Jerry had become of a healing nature. In short, she succeeded in bringing Jerry to such a pass that he was ready to promise her anything; and so long as he was looking at her he felt, directly he had finished a certain scheme he was working out his soul to achieve, that he would gladly renounce the slippery game of commerce. In unoccupied moments he could see visions of peace and joy in the sane restfulness of a country life—an arcadia invariably complicated with Jill. And in the midst of his most astute calculations, Jerry could pause to curse South Africa and his own luck, and to marvel at Fred—Fred—a dolt! a blind ass! an unappreciative Pharisee to permit a creature like Jill to suffer!

So far his ecstatic contemplation of Jill's new phase had preserved him from thinking hardly of poor little Nell, become now the unhappy victim of a chronic headache.

Mrs. de Salis was more seriously alarmed than ever.

Jill, she reflected, had an adoring husband and a fair allowance. Even if Eveleen had a baby, it might die; and there is always a little exhilaration to be screwed out of uncertainties. If it lived Fred, after all, held a career in the palm of his hand.

In her digging after causes for the new and amazing rectitude of bearing upon Jill's part, the lady fell even to suspecting Jill's honest family of a consumption. But disease with such pearly perfection as Jill's? Unpardonable assumption!

Failing consumption, Mrs. de Salis's fancy flew to slyness, and, dwelling upon it, out of slyness sprang prophetic visions. Once started upon this fatal track, Mrs. de Salis invariably beheld the Divorce Court. She began two letters to Mrs. Devereux, and tore each up in turn. The family, as a sphere of influence, presented difficulties to the diplomatic mind.

Lawrence Devereux, meanwhile, yielded himself up gracefully to the artistic enjoyment of Jill's essay in sainthood. Oddly enough, his belief in her absolute soundness was as staunch as Fred's—stauncher, perhaps, by a little, for never for a moment did Lawrence believe Jill capable of the bad taste of any misplaced attachment for Jerry. In regard to Jerry himself he felt less security. He was convinced that sooner or later Jerry would make an egregious ass of himself; but here he shrugged his shoulders. This was outside the domain of legitimate parental interference, and inevitable.

Lawrence was not constitutionally unkind, and he harboured a mild liking for his little daughter-in-law. He was really sorry for her, and might have felt himself moved to come to her assistance had her want of breeding not become so painfully obvious in her method of taking her grief. To see a woman wilt off into an uninterrupted headache and pink eyes at the crucial moment paralysed the higher emotions of Lawrence. "Break your heart, if needs be, but keep your complexion," was one of the articles of his creed. In the depths of his wicked old heart Lawrence had a deal more fellow feeling for sinning Jerry than for fading Nell.

Meanwhile, Jill was growing more cheerful, Jerry was only too anxious to oblige, Alleyne kept at the right side of Fleet Street, she was herself meekly prepared to renounce or obey, or anything else in reason—— Jill hated skimming the surface of anything; she preferred sounding the depths, and went as thoroughly into humility as the other virtues. Things seemed to be getting quite promising.

She really might be no more than a small circumstance in a great life, she felt sadly; at the same time Fred must be beginning to see the improvement in her. It seemed to her as though she could forge no farther upon her thorny road until she had ascertained if Fred's eyes were indeed being opened. Forthwith she fell to waylaying with much vigilance any vagrant signs of a new understanding upon the part of Fred.

* * * * *

Things were in this state when one day Mrs. de Salis came in, her eyes shooting out inquiries.

Jill, who was being nice to a whole row of wondering women, perceiving the unwonted agitation in her friend's deportment, went forward sympathetically.

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Eveleen Kendrick has given birth to a boy."

There was a sudden hush in the assembly. For a minute Jill felt stunned; she had not before realised the coming event. It had amused her. She now found herself wondering at the unreadiness of people, and laughed.

"How pleased Eveleen will be!" she said.

Mrs. de Salis sat down limply.

"There's nothing determination backed by a sound doctrinal education won't do. I've known Eveleen for thirty-five years——" She broke off and stared at Jill. Had the girl lost all her spirit?

"It will be curious to see Lord Kendrick dandling a baby," said Jill pensively. "In the natural course of events he must be dead before the child is of an age to criticise. Rather

fortunate, don't you think? It's so cruel to depress the young."

"Eveleen Kendrick has been taking unfair advantages of people since she could walk," mused Mrs. de Salis, with some apparent irrelevance.

"She's wonderfully insistent," said the next lady, who was intellectual, and studied character. "Had Eveleen had a large mind and some horizon, she might have been a notable woman."

"There's nothing particularly notable, so far as I can see, in being a steel file," said Mrs. de Salis absently, "and that's precisely what Eveleen Kendrick is."

Everybody was thunder-stricken at the untoward event save Eveleen herself. She, however, having used herself from childhood to overriding difficulties, was surprised at nothing. She had resolved ere she died to be Lady Kendrick, and having attained her desire, with the same unswerving patience, she determined to be the mother of a peer.

The occurrence, oddly enough, was a presage of ill to Jill. It opened several old wounds. It disturbed Fred. He said little, but she knew it was a blow to him.

One morning as Jill was going out he came in, looking different from any Fred she had yet seen.

"Are you going out?" he said. "Never mind, I won't keep you long. Sit here. Jill, did you know that Jerry has got Alleyne's name as chairman on the board of directors of a new company, and that the directors, to a man, are Alleyne's friends?"

Jill sprang to her feet. For a minute she said nothing, then she huddled down again into her big chair.

"No, I didn't know," she said at last, faintly. Her face was drawn.

Fred's last hope fled away screaming. But in spite of his own anguish, he could still find compassion for the dumb, affronted, perplexed pain in Jill's big eyes, the helpless way in which she seemed to hide herself in her winged chair. He lifted her gently and put pillows behind her shoulders.

"Fred, to believe that I knew!" she was thinking, in cold dumb despair.

"This company, I have only just found out is—well, fraudulent is a big word—but it's on the road that way. It's anything but absolutely straight, and Alleyne's name is being used to save it. Pleasant that! I don't accuse Jerry, Jill. I believe Jerry himself to be a cat's-paw, a puppet moved by the creatures of his precious father-in-law, so far successfully. Did you know that Jerry has within the last few weeks been realising large sums?"

He looked with steady inquiry into her shrinking face of pain. Suspected by Fred, befooled by Jerry, baffled, ineffective, defeated; Jill's heart was breaking.

"No," she said simply, "I didn't know."

Of a sudden she stood up, and in a vague gesture of appeal thrust her hands out before her. But the appeal was not to Fred. That was plain enough; his heart hung a little heavier, a little more cold.

"So Jerry has been deceiving all of us, all these months," she half whispered.

"Yes, Jerry has been deceiving all of us."

To Jill's quivering senses his voice sounded icy. One of the sudden changes that come sometimes into the relations of men and women, of husbands and wives, had set in with Fred. He was half numbed with doubt, dismay, fear, and an unutterable sorrow for Jill and for himself. He knew neither what to say nor what to do. Hitherto he had stood in awe of Jill's explainings. He had in his time flown before them. He now stood waiting in intense anxiety for Jill to speak.

"By the way," he said, "I'd better tell you that my uncle, in view of the new conditions, has decided to stop my allowance at Christmas."

Jill stared. At first she hardly understood; then the full truth flashed upon her. "Her face seemed to shrink up in an odd little knot.

"Did—did he say anything horrid about me?"

"About you to me? No."

She got back into her chair. Minutes dragged on like hours; the silence seemed to thicken and spread.

"You have nothing now," she said at last.

"We have three hundred a year."

Fred waited, waited. Once he put up his hand as a man may to ward off a blow. But patiently he waited. When Jill spoke she would speak the truth. Could any truth be worse than one doubt in regard to Jill? He walked over to the window and looked out into the quivering heat so as to make it easier for Jill to speak and himself to listen. But Jill was not ready to speak. Standing in the shadow of the curtains Fred looked more than ever like the day of judgment. Besides, what was there to be said of which he did not know everything, save the details? In this monumental chaos these had dwindled to nothing.

"If only he would say something," she thought drearily, "scold or be kind or—or anything. If—if he only knew the utter abject misery of failing in everything. To have been slaving for months to overcome one's besetting sins, and this to be the end of it!"

Another look let loose the reins of her imagination. It travelled, as usual, at full speed. In two minutes by the clock she was struggling in a quagmire of commercial immorality undreamt of even by the Radical press. Jerry hovered on the brink of the bottomless pit—Alleyne and all his friends, disgraced before their innocent wives, would be all thrown penniless upon a cold world!

She glanced piteously at Fred. His grave majesty, as he stood silent amidst the curtains, appalled her. She could not stand it one moment longer.

"Will you please go," she cried, "and give me a chance to think?"

He turned heavily to obey her, but paused to look back. In the intervening moment a last chance, magnificent in its possibilities, had occurred to Jill. Her mouth trembled, but its corners were turned up; her eyes beamed. With one short hard sigh, Fred left the room.

Jill started up, breathless. Surely he must come back! He must come back! When they were first married Fred had always, under all circumstances, come back. If she had been horrid, he always seemed to have come back only the more quickly. His steps, however, steadily retreated.

"To leave me like this!" she cried, with a sob. Then she stood up to straighten her hat in a glass. Her face looked so white and small that she sobbed again. Ambition must surely be withering Fred's heart, else—— She heard his steps slowly re-ascending the stairs, and scuttled to her chair.

"Jill," said the imperturable gentleman, "I'm very sorry, but I find I can't go with you to the Lanyons'. I've had a telegram to meet Lock and Jerry at five, and afterwards I must dine with Lock at Richmond. Jerry will probably be there too. It is all business and can't be helped. I shall not be back till late."

"It doesn't matter," said Jill, with proud serenity, "I can go with Cœlia."

"Can't you dine with her afterwards?" he said, looking anxiously down at her.

The hard, white hopelessness of her face tore at his heart. He stood appalled before his own helplessness.

"Oh yes," she said quickly, "I can dine with her. I know she will be at home."

"Good-bye, child."

"Dear God, have mercy upon us," said Fred, as he went down the stairs.

"It's like being deserted," said Jill again, tugging at her hat-pin. "I wonder—I wonder what men are made of. At least, I can prevent Fred's being thrown on the streets by his wicked old uncle. I can still do something."

Fortified, uplifted, restored, Jill stepped tragically downstairs, to be stopped half-way by Jerry, who from the second landing had been drinking in greedily the incredible bruised sadness of her young face. She started back at sight of him. He seized her hand.

"I must see you at once, but—but not here. Will you lunch with me at Henry's? I *must* see you."

Before Jerry had caught sight of Jill, his mission had been mainly one of explanation. To put things right with Jill and find at the same time solace for his worries had seemed to him his nearest, certainly his dearest, duty. Her face precipitated into fell purpose a chaos of fierce emotion.

"I have a room at Henry's they keep for me for business lunches. We can be undisturbed. I must speak to you. Come, Jill, I won't take any refusal. It—it is fate. Come."

He looked distracted. She, above all people in the world, dared not spurn a sinner. Perhaps he was repenting—perhaps even now he could retrieve himself and the others with *her* help. To help some one! To be of use to some one! Even to bring his sin home to some one!

Jill was in a mood to snatch at any straw. Without a word she followed him, and stepped into the waiting hansom, clean forgetting that Cœlia must already have been waiting for her over thirty-five minutes at Messrs. Howell & James's millinery department.

Jerry's absent-minded orders for luncheon brought back to Jill some of her powers of observation.

"The usual thing!" he repeated sharply, to the politely reflective waiter.

"Which is bones, sir, an' whiskeys an' Apollonaris."

"Oh, well," said Jerry, with a short laugh, "bring grilled chicken and champagne, and some fruit."

"Jerry——"

"Not a word, Jill, for God's sake, until you've eaten something. You can't know how you look."

He waited on her with an odd deprecating tenderness. He foresaw her wants, and waylaid her desires. In spite of herself, she was soothed. Her fatigue slipped away. She would be better able presently to say the right things, for to judge by the look of Jerry, he called for a clear mind. Just now she felt too dizzy to be logical. So for the sake of weaker brethren in the shape of the waiter, Jill contributed

her full share of banalities to the strange banquet. It was finished at last, however. The waiter was devouring a confused meal on the top of an inverted washing-up tub, and Jerry, with a quivering white face, was pouring into Jill's amazed ears a bewildering chaos of love, commerce, remorse, hope, and despair.

"This!" she said, in the first pause—"this!"

The motherly compassion in her eyes of a sudden checked Jerry's flow of words.

"Jill, you know I love you," he stammered, "you know that never for one moment have I ceased to love you. You know how it's all been."

Jill was now the stern accusing mother of ancient scripture.

"Did you mean to say all this when I met you—met you on the stairs?"

"No," said Jerry. "I came to explain."

"What—what changed your mind?"

"Your face of unutterable sorrow. Your face that has haunted me day and night for weeks."

"My abominable face! I feel—I almost feel as if I could never look in the glass again! Go on, Jerry, go on! I deserve it all."

The latter part of the sentence escaped Jerry's ear. He did go on gallantly. They belonged to each other, he protested. They had belonged to each other always. He could not live without her. Night and day his heart was crying aloud for her; without her nothing went right. Pleasure and profit were alike ashes in his mouth. He was not dishonourable. Not a cent of Nell's did he use, or would he accept. His speculations were carried on with his own £30,000 returned to him by Jabez. He had done well. He could take care of her. They should be happy in spite of fate.

There can be but little originality in the arguments peculiar to gentlemen in Jerry's position. He poured out an avalanche of the usual things.

A groan from Jill fetched him up at last.

"I see now—oh, I see it all now. This—this is what

fooling round the seventh commandment brings you to. To think of having to tell this to Fred—this! But I—I deserve anything."

"But, Jill, you loved me. You love me—I swear you do——"

"Loved you! Of course I did. I loved you dearly. But that was before I knew—before I had the sense to—to find out what Fred is. I love you now, I shall always love you, in a way. But oh, the difference there is in loving!"

"You were never really happy but once, Jill," he cried furiously, "and that was when we were engaged."

"Happiness?" she cried, trembling. "Happiness isn't everything."

"You're utterly, unspeakably unhappy. Don't dare to say you are not."

"That's—that's because I'm such a disappointment to myself—because I'm so unworthy of Fred. I never knew till lately how high, how dreadfully high, his opinion of me is—and how far I fall below it. I used to think differently. I used to hope to be the—the moving principle in Fred's affairs. That was before I knew—— Why, haven't I sufficiently proved my idiocy with you? When even I've failed with you——" Her eyes now flashed with their normal snap and spirit. "When for months past you've been deceiving us all." She threw up her hands. "Oh, don't tell me. I know everything! When I've failed—failed degradingly—with you, how can I expect to be satisfied with myself or of the very slightest use to Fred?"

This was a question out of Jerry's reach. With one short gasp he again took up his own particular thread.

"You've altered lately so much. You've been so dear, so sweet and tender."

She sprang up and faced him.

"Are you blind or mad? Couldn't you see that I've—I've been trying to make myself even a little like Fred's ridiculous opinion of me, so that I needn't be always feeling like a fraud. Must everything go wrong with me? Is this

what comes of trying to improve you—your mind and your disposition?"

She fixed her mournful eyes on Jerry. The white misery of his face, the unmistakable love in his desperate eyes, moved her cruelly.

"Jerry, oh, Jerry, you must love me immeasurably, else you'd never go the length of wanting to run away with me, and ruining your position. Social extinction would mean a lot to you." She paused, to intercept in Jerry's really rather candid eyes a shrewd gleam, whereupon a new light shone out from her own. "Ah! ah!" it was a sound like a sob. "You thought in face of the length of tether now permitted to millionaires—since shocking examples have gone out—that it's easy to break laws and keep your significance. It—it only depends on your income. You thought the extinction would only be temporary, a partial eclipse." She hid her face in her hands. "I should have thought the same myself, I dare say, Jerry. How revoltingly alike we are! You thought we'd have been so rich, so delightful, they'd have got over it and forgiven us. Oh, don't I know? You'd never be blotted out for any woman, Jerry; it isn't in you. You haven't the courage for great risks. Oh, Jerry, if only you could have done wrong in a—a right sort of way, it wouldn't be so—dreary. And your overweening, awful pride in imagining that having once known Fred really, I could ever run away with you. You as rival to Fred! The insult both to Fred and me! And to think that I can neither resent nor retaliate! Why, if anything, I'm worse than you!"

"I really see no reason why you should blame yourself," said Jerry, in contained wrath. "If coldness is virtue, then indeed——"

"A woman may be as virtuous as you please, but she should look it. A man won't make serious arrangements to run away with a woman, and sell shares to pay expenses, unless she's been a—a traitorous—c-cat. I don't want to be in any sort of way mean, or to make little of my own responsibility in the matter, but oh, Jerry, when I look at

you I feel as though I'd been building up a monster like Frankenstein, and he's turned and rent me." Her voice faltered and broke. While Jerry was searching for words she broke out again: "And, Jerry, Jerry, all this time we've utterly forgotten Nell."

"Nell! Nell is a headache."

"Yes," admitted Jill miserably. "Between us we've made her one. We've turned a hare-bell into a headache."

"For God's sake, leave Nell," he groaned. "Jill, you'll never be happy with Fred. He doesn't understand you. You don't understand him. He'll never understand you."

"If—if he forgives me and loves me, I won't mind so much."

"You will never understand Fred," said Jerry obstinately.

Jill's nose was in the air.

"You would naturally say so. You'll admit at least that I've been altering my opinion lately about—several things."

"We were made for each other, you and I. It follows——"

"No it doesn't," she cried promptly. Again his face smote her. "I'm quite ready to admit," she said more gently, "that if things hadn't been—been—interrupted, and I hadn't got to know Fred properly, we'd have done splendid things together—we'd have made people stare, and got on all right generally. But now that all seems so—oh, you know—so hollow."

"Any way, it would have been as near heaven," said the wretched Jerry, "as we could either of us expect to get."

The claim of equality was like a bruise to Jill, with Fred thinking of her as everlasting hills! As a sort of penance, however, in this matter she held her peace and proceeded humbly:

"I'm not pretending to anything, Jerry, I need hardly say, or to doing anything right, and the mistake I made with Fred was trying to take him at a gallop. You can't do it. He's too great, too fathomless.—But—but let us come back to Nell. The thought of what I've made her suffer is all coming home to me. And I've been so horrid in the little

ways. I've let her fall into the habit of not caring—of being a chronic wisp. And, indeed, I now see that my time would have been spent to more purpose in looking after Nell than in attempting to influence you, considering that the result of all my worry is your making Alleyne and his friends partners in your guilty transactions——"

"Jill——"

"Don't explain, Jerry. I won't listen to a word of explanation. It will give you as much as you can do to explain to Fred and from this hour I renounce the City. Oh, oh, what a lesson it's been!"

Baffled, driven, miserable, Jerry's irritation broke into words.

"I fancy Fred will find enough to do in arranging his own affairs, with his allowance cut off——"

Jill whirled up before him like an avenging spirit.

"You knew this!—this! When a man's down, to come and ask his wife to run away with you! Oh, Jerry! Jerry! Jerry!" she wailed. "And to think that once I thought it heaven to be engaged to you! Oh, oh, if Grandmother Devereux were ever to know of this!"

"I'd better go, Jill. You are more merciless than I thought it possible even for a woman to be."

"I'm not merciless, but—I want to be fair—to all of us, and it's so difficult when one feels torn and dragged and draggled. Yes, you'd better go and let us get our wits straight. I wish there was a desert one could go to," she sighed. "As there's not, Jerry, when can you go to Nell?"

Jerry muttered something below his breath.

Jill's thoughts were fixed too firmly, too miserably upon Nell to listen to him.

"And, Jerry, some day, when she's forgiven you, will you speak one little word for me? And, in the meantime, go round with her yourself to the shops. Jerry, do you hear? You needn't pretend that your mind is too big for that sort of thing like—like some people's. Go round and make her choose the right things."

Jerry, dumb with misery, was leaning up against the chimney-

piece. Jill began to fasten her gloves, but her hands trembled and shook.

To leave him like this, in the greatest trouble of his life, and herself the cause! To cast him from henceforth for ever out of all her thoughts and hopes and fears! To deliver him up to his own poor keeping, to despair—perhaps even to drink and evil companionship! She could not do it. Whatever he did, Jerry belonged to her as he did to all of them, as he must to the day of his death.

The pent-up tears coursed down her cheeks. The sobs she had been beating back broke into audible passion. Sobbing, trembling, heart-broken, she went to him.

"Jerry, I'll never have another happy moment—not even—not even with Fred, unless I know that some day Nell will be happy, and no one but you can make her happy. And, dear, I shall never be happy myself if I am to know that after all our hopes and fears for you—we've been hoping and fearing for you ever since I can remember—and Grandmother Devereux has been praying—and if after all you are to dwindle down into a City swindler! It will break my heart, it will break all our hearts. If ever you are in any single way less than you might be, the man we expect you to be, you'll spoil my life. Fred is the one I love. But your goodness and my happiness seem to be bound up together. Nothing will unloose them. A dozen marriages would make no difference."

"Jill! Jill! And yet you expect a man not to love you," he groaned.

"I couldn't expect anything so unreasonable," she sobbed. "But oh, love is so true, so beautiful and loyal and long-suffering a thing—as living with Fred teaches you—that if a man loves me, I expect him to behave at least with common decency."

CHAPTER XXXIII

TORN by compassion, remorse, and anxiety, Jill would not let Jerry out of her sight until she had seen him safely off at Victoria Station.

His one desire now was to get away anywhere that he might pull himself together—in Jill's opinion, a most sane and reasonable desire that should be given every encouragement. To go to Nell as he was now, broken and reckless, must ruin everything. Jerry's way of taking suffering seemed to Jill to be wanting in dignity. Until he could show himself to more advantage he was better alone.

A train was just starting for Ramsgate. Any desert would suffice; why not Ramsgate as well as another?

"Telegraph to her the minute you arrive," entreated Jill, "the very minute. Oh, Jerry, good-bye!"

She turned and hurried away through the surging crowd. There was an excursion that day. The platform was packed. For a full ten minutes Jill was jammed in the throng, and when at last she emerged for quite a long time she could find no cab. She knew that her eyes were red; her one thought was to escape observation and get home. She told the cabman, when at last she found one, to drive fast, but before she had got half down Buckingham Palace Road, upon the imperious motion of the occupant of an imposing carriage her cab drew up, and the next minute Nell's white face appeared in the doorway.

"You!" she cried, "you! I've been to look for you—to—— Where's Jerry?"

"Jerry's gone to Ramsgate."

"Gone to Ramsgate—alone? Where—where were you going?"

"Going home."

"What—what is it?"

Nell clutched the door in a terrifying sort of way. In dismay Jill seized her hands. Nell tore them away.

"You must come back with me now—this minute," said Nell.

Without waiting for any answer she turned to give the address to the driver, who, scenting domestic drama at a good address, drove off gaily.

Jill wished vaguely that she could have rested first; it would be so difficult to face Nell tired. Still in a horrid dream, she got out of the cab, paid the man, and followed Nell up the great stairs. The instant the door was shut Nell turned upon her like a tiger.

"Jerry?" she cried, in a broken little scream.

"Jerry has gone to Ramsgate to rest."

Nell's eyes pierced her. Then she swayed slowly from side to side, moaning.

"I see by your face it's come. I knew—I knew it would come—I knew it would come."

She clutched out into the helpless air and dropped down limp upon the carpet. Jill knew little of fainting, but she had a practical mind. She lifted Nell and laid her on a great blue couch, and the touch of her abhorrent hands was Nell's best cure. She soon sat up.

"Jerry?" she said feebly.

"He's at Ramsgate."

"Tell me everything," she commanded, and, feminine throughout, herself took the field. "I knew it would come—ah! I knew it—I've known it this long time. I tried—I tried for Jerry's sake to believe the best of you. But you must have everything. No one must stand in your path. You are cruel, greedy, mean, merciless——"

This indictment, with the awful glint of truth in it, from the lips of this ignorant child!

"Do you believe I'm all that? Oh, Nell, your being able to think it is bad enough."

Jill could see her on her blue sofa, limp and drooping, with aching head and red eyes, thinking it all out for weeks,

accusing her, hating her. It was all so unexpected, and yet so hideously commonplace. The commonness, the vulgarity, in the whole affair struck Jill dumb. To have degraded another woman into the position of fighting for a husband she certainly did not want, her one and only desire being to save him from fraudulent company promoting.

"I knew it would come," wailed Nell monotonously. "But —but I can't understand. Why are you here?"

The agony growing in Nell's sobs helped Jill to collect her wits.

"Nell, what made you think——?" She could say no more.

"Lady Kendrick told me she saw you and Jerry going away together by the Ramsgate train."

Fred to be the victim of Eveleen's odious gossip! In the contemplation of this stupendous injustice Jill could barely keep her thoughts fixed upon Nell; but, putting her own concerns sternly aside, she sat down beside the great sofa.

"I knew it would come," repeated Nell.

"Nothing has come," said Jill firmly, "and nothing is going to come. I'll tell you everything, Nell," she said, "and then you can judge better of everything. As for me, I deserve all you can say to me. I have been cruel, and vain, and merciless, just as you say; but I haven't been dishonourable, I have not injured you, really. When I got Jerry's cablegram to say he was married, I can confess now that I thought no other sorrow in the whole wide world had ever been so bad as mine. I could have killed you and Jerry. I hated myself, I behaved abominably all round. I thought I could never be happy again. But since I've had the sense to see what Fred is, never once have I regretted Jerry."

Nell, who had been moaning softly all the time, here paused for an instant and then went on with her moaning. Jill looked at her with pathetic entreaty. "I deserve it, of course," she thought, looking as she sighed somewhat younger even than sobbing Nell, "but, oh, if only she could stop."

"Even if I had cared for Jerry in that sort of way," she went on, "I—couldn't have run away with him. I have been

curiously brought up—it would have made me too uncomfortable. It's difficult to explain, but if you've been brought up in the fear of the devil you can be idiotic and abominable and everything else, but you can't very well be actively vicious; besides, living with Fred makes you dreadfully particular." Her eyes were dreaming and absent; she had, to a great extent, forgotten Nell. "Once you've been married to Fred you could never go back to Jerry; your one thought would be to make him more like Fred."

Nell checked her sobs, and—could such a word be applied to so gentle a being—snorted.

"Jerry belongs to me. I don't want him to be like Mr. Morton. Mr. Morton has always been good to me—oh, so good!—but he's so grave and great; he's above my head. I have no aims, no ambitions; I could never grow big enough for Mr. Morton. He's been in to see me several times lately." Jill started violently. "He's—he's like a father to me——"

"Fred is exactly two years older than Jerry."

"But—but think of his real age?"

"Twenty-six," said Jill magnificently.

Nell dropped that thread.

"Jerry—Jerry is good enough for me," she protested. "He's always been good to me. I've loved him from the first day I knew him; he'd have loved me if you had let him," she cried passionately. "I'm—I'm not a Devereux. I haven't been brought up as you have been. Jerry is better than most other men. I can understand him. If Jerry was like Mr. Morton, it—it would be like losing Jerry," she whimpered. "If you thought I couldn't help him, couldn't you have let Jerry stand alone?"

"Oh, Nell, but that's just exactly what Jerry can't do."

"Then—then let him fall. I won't mind, I can help him up again; besides, I've known things—I have that sort of blood in me. I can guess, and I found out things. I was doing what I could. I'm not clever enough to think I can do things better than men, but I know Jerry, and I knew that he was being—got at. I've been born in it," she said sadly. "I felt sure

that nothing but a big mistake would teach Jerry that he was going wrong——"

"Oh, Nell——"

"I know what you're thinking of. This company is a mistake. My father's lawyer is good and kind; he tells me things. Jerry doesn't know—the—the game, and he's playing it with men who know it blindfold. It's in my blood. I know—by instinct. Neither you nor Jerry could ever learn."

Jill choked inaudibly. After all her prodigious airs—this!

"Jerry's not fit for the City. He's too good and sweet and gentle, and he gets enthusiastic. My father's lawyer says that enthusiasm is never safe in England at all, and in Ireland only in the country. When this company turns out badly," she continued, more quietly, "Jerry will be more sorry than any one else. I think it will sicken him with the City. And I've been writing to my father; he's always been good to me——"

The apology in her voice was piteous.

"He would like, and so should I, that Jerry should be a landowner. A great deal of the property that used to belong to the Devereuxs is for sale; Mr. Morton found out for me——"

Jill winced, whereupon gentle little Nell felt sorry for her small revenge.

"That's all he knows," she added hastily. "I had to ask him; he was the only one who could know. And I've found out about the money part. I have enough to put things right again. No one meant to be dishonest, and no one shall suffer; no one will be really blamed."

"And I thought you lay on that sofa and had headaches all the time! Nell, you believe in Jerry?"

"If I didn't believe in Jerry," said Nell softly, "I should die."

"Then you are the only one in the whole wide world who can be of real use to Jerry," cried Jill.

Nell, we can only hope, failed to catch the full import of this impulsive pronouncement.

Suddenly Jill threw herself on her knees beside the gorgeous sofa sobbing like a child.

"Nell! Nell! Nell! Will you ever forgive me? Oh, Nell, you must. Don't think I'm not being punished. Oh, Nell, I am. If you only knew what it is to me—*me*, to feel like a worm, an utter, abject, ridiculous worm. It's dreadful; it's unspeakable—a frog that tried to puff itself out into a bull! To have been despising you for want of spirit and red eyes when all the time you were doing the one right thing. Jerry's just like me—what he wants to open his eyes is a lesson."

Nell was flushing and paling.

"When—when do you think Jerry will come back?"

"I think—I think he'll have to sleep on it, don't you?"

"Yes," she said sadly, her eyes falling again. "I think he will."

"I've never been really happy," said Nell presently. "I had no proper childhood. It must be beautiful to be happy."

A sob rose in Jill's throat.

"I—I'm glad you don't feel as though it was your duty to hate me," she said softly. "Oh Nell!" she cried the next minute, shuddering, "if I'd given you any real cause! I wonder how a woman feels who has ruined another in that way? When I was a child I used to be so sorry for those women. They seemed so mysterious and awful."

A host of Scripture phrases bearing on the point dinned into her youthful ears rushed to Jill's mind; she shivered and grew paler.

"I always prayed for Rahab, the harlot, and Bathsheba, and any one else I could remember, and the Pope all in a row. It was hard on the Pope, but it came of being an Irish Protestant. It sounds ridiculous; but, Nell, I often howled myself to sleep thinking of them, always brooding out in deserts, shunned even by the wild beasts. And to think that you and Jerry and Fred—all the people I care for," she sobbed, "should think me capable of being—one of them."

"Jill," said Nell, weeping now for company, "I didn't think you could be so nice. I used to wonder—now I don't wonder at all."

Jill's head shot up.

"Jerry never saw me making a fool of myself like this."

"But," said Nell sadly, with unconscious philosophy, "he must have suspected that you could, else——"

Her own woe came back in a run. She broke off with a sob.

It was time to change the subject. Jill dried her eyes.

"Presently, when we're all happier, Nell, will you let me help you with your clothes? If you do go over to Ireland you must be a wonder. Jerry will like that. You mustn't startle, you know—we're not vulgar by nature; don't judge by me! But—we like being—sort of awed by that perfection in the little things quite beyond the scope of a limited income. Real lace on your petticoats will give them a feeling of poetry. That's the line you must take," said Jill, her eyes raking Nell. "Jerry's imagination is in abeyance for the moment, but it will wake up on its native heath. He'll like to see you having that sort of effect. He'll be immenseiy proud of you, and of their rendering of you, you know. I can see you and him and the audience—and Grandmother Devereux." She paused, flushing. "Nell, I'll tell you now. I meant to huddle most of this wretched business out of her sight—to tell her just a little. But that was before I quite knew. Now I'll tell her every word, and she'll like you most awfully."

She turned to put her hat straight, and her eyes were full of tears.

To lose the well-concealed but unswerving esteem of Grandmother Devereux was gall and wormwood to Jill. She never knew until this miserable moment how much she had treasured the unbending commendation of that strong, straight, awe-inspiring old woman.

"If Jerry doesn't come to-morrow!" said Nell, trembling.

"Why, then you'll just have to go and bring him," said Jill.

CHAPTER XXXIV

At last she could escape from the sight of Nell's heart-rending face; but the thought of Fred's, when he should know all, brought her but little consolement.

She had her latchkey, and would creep in and hide herself from human eyes. Even the servants might see things in her face.

Not a soul was about. She got to her room undetected, threw herself on the bed, and did her best to think. But she could do nothing but ache and shiver off into a sleep broken by sobs—the sleep of a grieving child. And she awoke as children will, however stricken they may be, rosy and rested, looking forward through all the bitter blur of facts to the blue of the bright horizon.

She sprang up feeling young and light, but by the time she had got to her hair æons of centuries seemed to be pressing down upon her. She felt sick with age, when there leapt all at once into her agile mind her destined visit to Lord Kendrick.

"How fortunate I thought of it!" sighed Jill, as she fastened her shoe. "It will be such a relief to be able to pay him back in a right sort of way. It will be like going back to old times," she thought pathetically; "I shall feel partly alive again."

Fortified by this reflection and a new hat, Mrs. Morton's handsome face looked particularly engaging as she swam serenely into Lord Kendrick's great gloomy drawing-room.

As she went along the corridor of her flat, Jill had wondered carelessly what had become of the servants; the place seemed to be deserted. But, since her servants adored her and served her faithfully, Jill rarely troubled about domestic concerns when Fred was away. She called no one, nor did she leave any message.

"They know I'm dining out," she told herself airily, "so it doesn't really matter."

All the blinds were up in the Kendricks' great glaring room. A bored and cynical nurse stood at attention on the hearthrug, while the peer was utilising a fleeting respite from Eveleen in going over his heir with his accustomed thoroughness and circumspection—a proceeding resented upon the part of the puny infant by a succession of protesting squeals.

"Please don't move," cried Jill. "I've never had a good look at him. Oh, Lord Kendrick, he's the born image of Eveleen. There's not a trace of Morton in him. How pleased Eveleen must be! That's what comes of marrying a woman with a great mind."

Lord Kendrick, for a minute stricken dumb, now sprang to his feet, with an imperious gesture of dismissal handed the howling and terrified baby to its nurse, then carefully closed the door. His face was stone; his eyes shot out pale flame.

"You here—you! Mrs. Morton, will you be so good as to explain?"

"What! Did Eveleen tell you, too, that I was running away with Jerry to Ramsgate?" she inquired serenely. "Do you suppose for a moment that I should have run to Ramsgate, of all places in the world? I couldn't imagine a more unsuitable place for that sort of amusement. The air certainly is good, but—well, we won't dwell on the disadvantages. I went to Victoria Station to see Jerry off to Ramsgate. He is tired and overstrained, and must have a day or so at the sea. I have just left his wife. I am sorry Eveleen should have taken so much trouble to no purpose. When Jerry comes back to-morrow, and I have been here all the time, don't you think Eveleen will feel rather put out? Unproductive malice, even when done on principle, must be mortifying to a clever woman. Do you think she's had time to call on *all* my friends?" inquired Jill, with an artless air.

Lord Kendrick drew himself up.

"My wife has gone to Richmond to spend the day with a sick friend."

"Richmond! But Richmond would have been an absurd place to carry so rich a freight of good news to. I don't know a soul there, and Eveleen is far too unselfish to enjoy any pleasure alone. Of course she came back directly she saw us at Victoria Station? She's as prompt as she is kind."

"Kindly remember, Mrs. Morton, that you're speaking of—of my wife."

Jill looked at him steadily.

"I have not forgotten, Lord Kendrick. When Fred has been round to contradict the story that Lady Kendrick has sent flying round the town, I only hope that he won't forget, that's all."

Fred's uncle winced nervously.

"Once, and only once, I've seen Fred actually awful," said Jill sweetly. "It was when a woman went peacocking round gaily with a slanderous lie about a younger woman. And this woman believed devoutly in her lie. I doubt very much if Eveleen did. She's remarkably astute. She must feel sure I'd never have run away to Ramsgate. Ramsgate for the background of an elopement!"

Lord Kendrick's trembling fingers fumbled for his watch.

"I—I have important business to attend to."

"I am afraid mine must be attended to first," said Jill, settling herself in her chair. "I didn't come to discuss this sickening business. I leave that in more capable hands. I came about a really serious matter."

"I regret very much," he stammered, "but it is rather late. I have an urgent appointment after dinner."

"Not so urgent as my case. I won't keep you long, Lord Kendrick. I shall soon get to my point. I needn't go through the details—you know them. You remember that evening I asked you to take me home? I was too tired; I was too much afraid of—of something, to pretend to any pride. I felt lonely and lost, and unfit to take care of myself. There was no need to put on tragic airs. You saw it all in my face."

Lord Kendrick's nervous hands were twitching; his eyes

were fastened, in spite of themselves, upon Jill's resolute face. But, by sheer reflex action, he tried to bluster.

"I refuse—I distinctly refuse——"

Jill stooped forward, and looked with quiet accusation into his shifty eyes.

"You'll refuse me nothing," she said. "You've already suffered too much for what you once refused me. I threw myself on your mercy, you'll remember, and you refused to help me, or stand by Fred. Knowingly you put Fred's name in danger——"

"You——"

"Oh, I know my own part in it too well—my own foolishness. You knew at the time that I knew it. Goodness knows, I was humble enough. Well—my child died."

Her whole heart in her subject, Jill sprang to her feet.

"There's not a night of your life!" she cried, "that you don't lie awake and think of yourself as that child's murderer, and my face haunts you. Never once since that evening have you dared to look straight in my face. You can't escape from the way you are made, and you—you've got a qualmy conscience. You never look at your own child but you feel guilty, for its birth was bound up in meanness and dishonour. It would never have been born at all if my baby had lived. The death of my baby," she cried, with a cruel shot at the truth, "was the goad in the hands of an expert that clenched your fate. Oh, you know it was. When a man's always had his own way, to be married must be a bore. It needs genius on the part of the object to overcome his natural instincts of self-preservation."

Lord Kendrick shrank and cowered under this amazing avalanche. The centre of an admiring feminine crowd, the hope of a vast and increasing circle, the stay of many a stricken soul with the right views, to be flouted by a chit of a child!

"To what purpose," said the unhappy man, stung at last to words—"to what purpose is this most astonishing discourse?"

"Because I want to save you from further crime; because I have some consideration for your death-bed. Having done

all this to Fred, you now propose, I believe, to cut off his allowance."

"The conditions are entirely altered," he bleated. "Fred is not penniless. He has, moreover, brains and ambition——"

"Neither the brains nor the ambition of my husband run to journalism or the writing of society novels. You can't mew up a future Cabinet Minister in a garret or build up his career in one. If a man is to rule the world—or"—Jill coughed modestly—"even a little bit of it, the world must see him and know him and feel him, and get ready to follow him, and," she said airily, as if by an afterthought—"and he must have the opportunity of learning something about the world. All his boyhood Fred's light was hid under a bushel—it makes me cold even to think of it. He's certainly not going to have it thrust under one again. Fred's brain and soul and heart must be left free for great things. He can't be frittering himself away in the chase after sordid necessities."

Jill sat down on the arm of her relative's chair and took solemn and inexorable hold of his twittering hands.

"Lord Kendrick, if you don't undo this abominable wrong you're going to do to Fred, I'll tell him everything."

"He—he doesn't know, then?"

The words came out upon a great sigh.

"Fred know? How could I humiliate his nearest relative in Fred's eyes? You seem to know very little about Fred. Fred is great enough to forgive a—a murder." She paused; her lips trembled. "But to ask him ever to forgive a man for being a cat! You couldn't. However, my duty now is to speak. I shall tell Fred. I shall also tell Lawrence Devereux. You will be the butt of all the clubs. I'll make you wish you were never born, Lord Kendrick, unless you do justice to—to the man it should be your proudest boast to help towards his great future." Jill bent down to him. "I don't want to quarrel with you" she said soothingly; "you're old and you look so tired and unsatisfied, and your conscience must feel horrid—besides, you're Fred's uncle. And after all," she said, with irresistible gentleness, "if you

have a guilty conscience, so have I. I've done nothing lately but go wrong. I'm a stack of fatal mistakes. I've known Jerry from the time he was four years old, and I've failed with him. I shouldn't dare to be hard on any one just now, so if you'll do right by Fred, I'll be so nice you'll get to like me immensely, and wonder how you ever could have misjudged me. And think of the convenience of having a room where you'll always be welcome, and made much of, and taken care of—I can be very comforting if I'm only given the chance," she added sadly, but with the smile of an impersonal angel.

Lord Kendrick wiped his forehead pathetically.

"I—I do not deny that the infant's death has been a sincere grief to me, and I may have been somewhat remiss. You, however——"

"Never mind that now. We've both confessed, more or less, and we've got to repent and atone. We'll begin together, you and I. Repenting is so much more interesting when carried on in human companionship."

Lord Kendrick fairly fell together. His hands wriggled feebly in the girl's unrelenting clasp. She had now slipped down from the arm of his chair, and was kneeling before him, half commanding, half entreating. She filled him with an odd shame.

The petty mean actions inseparable from a shallow, weak, woman-bred nature, sincere religion and hypocrisy for ever warring together in the flesh, growing confused in the feeble manipulations of a nervous, well-meaning, ineffective brain, grew like gourds in his mind.

Jill's dead child had, in good sooth, haunted and beset him. Discomfort in the presence of Fred had filled him with an unrighteous detestation of an innocent man. Used as he was to absolute self-satisfaction, his racking doubts of himself had given him no peace for months, and little rest. Eveleen was an abiding mill-stone about his neck.

And here was a girl who searched your soul, who demanded greatness—importunate, exacting! Under such a gaze a man was powerless.

"It has been in some measure against both my will and my judgment that I at last decided to terminate my allowance to my nephew. As you represent matters, I may possibly have done wrong. We are but human. Frailty is the heritage of all our tribe. You have put your case strongly. It has certainly many salient points. You can, in short, inform your husband that I have rescinded my determination and can but hope that he will make the best use of his means and his opportunities."

Jill jumped up and kissed him.

"Eveleen will think more of you than she ever dreamed of being able to do. Oh, I know it," she said feelingly. "It's only when you find that a man can walk all round you while you're off fooling round trifles, that you really begin to know how much sense he must have. A man must have an immense intellect," she said plaintively, "before he'll thoroughly convince a woman she's been a fool. It's the one incontrovertible testimony to his sagacity.—I say, you're all alone, and so am I. Shall we dine together?" cried Jill, upon a magnificent inspiration.

"He's so tired and dull and convicted of sin," she thought rapidly, "and it will be as imply gorgeous refutation to Eveleen's budget of police news. Besides, I can't go back yet to a half-empty house."

"Fred won't be back till ever so late. Eveleen is with the sick friend by this time," she added sweetly. "We both want cheering up. Come, we'll dine at Prince's."

He looked at her. A faint little spark flashed back at him from his vanished youth. He groaned and coughed, and, while still refusing, Jill hustled him off to dress.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE longing to be home again, getting ready for Fred, seized his wife at about half-past nine.

Up to then a genuine desire to give Fred's uncle one happy evening, the grotesque novelty of conveying comfort to so comfortless a soul, stirring a heart so extraordinarily inert, had exhilarated Jill to unusual efforts. She forgot herself to such an extent that the old man never to the day of his death forgot her or her face during that brilliant evening. Sometimes in the melancholy after-days it could even soothe him into a brief forgetfulness of Eveleen.

When Jill had ordered his dinner for him and seen that he ate it, she took him for a drive along the river ways, and later for a memorable walk upon the Embankment. She petted and provoked him gaily. She provided him likewise with some new insights into a religion which made him gasp. As the night fell darker she gave him some curious swift glances into a heart that fluttered and alarmed him by its power of sinning, aching, and repenting. She brought his youth back to him, and a throb of those old yearnings for the greater things that he had long forgotten—a memory which, in the end, carried sorrow, regret, and hope in its train, and a gentler judgment of all things.

"I wish, my dear—I wish that I had known you before——" His thin voice broke off with a pitiful crack as they turned the corner of the dull square in which the Kendrick mansion looked down upon all its neighbours.

"So do I," said Jill earnestly. "It's been one of the mistakes. We seem to have been sinning side by side, we two. We're curious partners in guilt, aren't we?" Here her own griefs came pattering back upon her in a great tempest. She huddled up against an astonished shoulder. "Oh, Lord Kendrick, if—if it had been Jerry, and Nell at home alone!

I'm quite sure that vision of desolation—Nell on the blue sofa," she said dreamily, "must always have come between one and any enjoyment one might reasonably expect to have." She shook and shivered. "Women," she said at last—"women who run away with their neighbours' husbands oughtn't to have any imagination. It would spoil everything. I wonder if it's want of culture or being brought up with the devil that makes one feel so odd about quite ordinary occurrences."

She turned her inquiring eyes upon Lord Kendrick; he stared open-mouthed, but could find no fitting text.

"And to be supposed capable of this sort of thing! Ugh! Good-night," said Jill. "I'm firmly resolved that nothing—nothing is ever going to spoil our friendship. Good-night!"

She leaned out to watch him in an odd aged way faltering up the steps.

"Another lost opportunity," she murmured. "I might have saved the poor old man from Eveleen."

With a sigh she gave the order for home.

As the cab, a rackety conveyance, the stay and support of a private owner, rattled along the streets, Jill's courage ebbed, her heart fell like lead.

To begin from the very beginning, to put every sordid vile little detail into common words—to see Fred's face as she bared her wretched little disappointment of a soul before his incredulous eyes, to see the incredulity, under the whip of conscientious effort, drop slowly from those divine orbs, to behold the dawn of a destroying belief arise within them! To keep herself from uttermost despair, Jill refused any longer to consider her own folly. She laid firm hold upon the wisdom of Fred.

The cab jerked up at last. In a twtnkling Jill was out and up the stairs. She burst into the study. Fred's cane was on the table, and one of his gloves.

"Fred! Fred!" she called out.

But no Fred came. She pounced upon an envelope fallen upon a chair—Eveleen's writing, and no postmark. She had

called, then, and left it. Fred had read it. Trembling, Jill fell into a chair.

What had she done? What had she done? Would any life be long enough to undo it?

Had Fred—had Fred also gone to Ramsgate? The thought drove her to her feet. She stood breathless, panting; and presently there was a shuffle of slow feet. The door opened and Fred came in like one in a dream. His hands were thrust out before him gropingly. His eyes were vacant, dull. He staggered dumbly and seemed to fight for his wits. Brain, sight, sensation had been beaten into a horrid inertness.

"You!" he said at last dully. "You!"

The word cut her like a knife. She clutched his arm.

"Fred! Fred! Fred! Oh, look at me! Look at me, dear heart, and you'll know."

He forced himself into life, took hold of her, and put her down in a chair. But Jill clung for her life to both his hands.

"Look," she pleaded, "only look. Fred, there's nothing you need be afraid to see but—but abject idiocy."

Her entreating face, the unmistakable, maddening, exquisite love in her eyes, the sob in the voice, set against those weeks of torture, the letter in his pocket, Jerry's absence, no tidings of Jill anywhere. He had been to Cœlia, who knew nothing; Nell's house was shut up. His own servants had not seen their mistress since he himself had seen her. It was all beyond this man of simple faiths.

To throw off her clinging hands, or refuse to look into her eyes of truth, was likewise beyond him, but they hampered his senses.

"Jill," he said gently, "let me sit down."

"Sit near me, then. Don't go far; if you do, I can tell you nothing. Fred, every atom of every thought in me is quite fit for you to see. And oh, to think I should be insisting on this to you—to you!"

"Jill, tell me. Where have you been?"

Without a pause she rushed through that day of events with all their ridiculous unnecessary tragedy.

"Fred," she cried at last, with a sob, "when did you begin—begin—not to believe in me? Oh!" she pressed her hands to her heart. "Oh, I didn't know it would hurt like this."

"I have thought now for some weeks," said Fred, speaking as though the words were torn from him, "that you still loved Jerry. I thought that to-day something outside yourself—you are at the mercy of strange impulses, Jill—had driven you into a mad act for which you would suffer as no woman of all those who have suffered upon this sad earth has ever yet suffered." He lifted up her face with a great pity. "Oh, child, you're too great, too sound at soul, to sin—to sin in any common way; you suffer too cruelly."

"Fred, you do believe me?"

"How can I help believing you?"

"But to have thought I could, Fred! I'll never feel quite the same again, no matter how much you forgive me."

"There's no talk of forgiveness. We've both been fools. I think I know now what you want—more or less," he added cautiously. "You see, everything that seemed to me to be unreasonable I put down to the fact of your being a woman—I know so little about them, dear. I—I put you by for future consideration. I did not venture to speculate much for fear of getting deeper in the slough. In this way I've probably overlooked and neglected just the very—hem! symptoms—that I ought to have attended to. On the whole, Jill, I believe I've been a brute. I've been too dull to arrive all at once at a full understanding of the finer shades of married life, and one is always rather afraid of prying," he said, with a shy laugh.

"Oh, Fred, as though I should mind your seeing anything! I have been longing all these weeks that you'd take even the trouble to glance at me. Why, everybody's rather thunderstruck at the improvement in me."

"Are they? I didn't know you wanted any improvement."

"To think I could be content with Jerry when I had you to fight for! Don't say I haven't fought for you, Fred; I have. It's—I think it's been rather—oh, you know—like wrestling with God for you, Fred. But I've got you! You angel! you darling! you man amongst mannikins! To think I'd prefer Jerry and—and—Ramsgate! And," she cried, with a sudden accession of vigour, "it's been a great deal of it your own fault: making little of yourself is an insult to both of us. If a man is great to his finger-tips——"

"But, Jill," cried the bewildered gentleman, "I thought, dear, your one want was to see me making mistakes."

"As if you couldn't understand! That was to give me a chance to get near you! You seemed too great, too near sinless perfection, thoroughly to appreciate me. It was too awful to be always out in the cold. One could commit any crime to get to you, Fred. If I had married Jerry and you were about—then, ah, then, indeed—— But all the thanks I'd get," she murmured sadly, "would be to be sent home in a cab. When I think of what might have happened! Fred, why didn't you beat me?"

This untoward humility was fast disorganising Fred. He felt battered, and then a new light flashed up suddenly amongst the hosts of others which were illuminating the speaking countenance of his wife.

"Fred, I've got hold of a new point of view. I believe you're not so altogether angelic after all. I believe you're a subtle, fiendish, vindictive, modern Petruchio. You've been curing me with a hair of the dog that bit me. You've been giving me just enough rope to hang myself with. I've been the victim of a system. I do think you must have some sense of diabolical humour, Fred."

"Oh, Jill, it's no use; I can't follow you, dear. Do you know that now you're accusing me of being an utterly graceless cad? Do you think I should be likely to put your name in danger, dear, in order to teach you a lesson? I knew that you were never made to wobble even into an earthly Paradise as so many excellent women are content to do. I knew you'd

have to take things generally by violence, to the great hurt of yourself and every one who cares for you. I trusted you utterly—and I took the risk."

"If ——" Jill's eyes were black with terror.

"Cut those unnecessary 'ifs' clean out of your imagination, Jill. Where is the sense in torturing both yourself and me?"

"But your thinking that I could——"

"You gave me ample and sufficient reason for so thinking."

Jill winced in silence. It was the blow that seemed to hurt every nerve in her body. In a dim way Fred knew what he had done. But he withdrew nothing. He held her tenderly and touched her lustrous hair.

"Let us put all this aside for ever."

"Oh, but can we?"

"Call it your wild oats. That may help," said Fred.

She stepped back and stared at him.

"The longer I live the more convinced I am that no man can ever understand the things that go on in a woman's mind. If this is wild oats, it's a greatly overrated amusement, that's all. If it makes you feel as little hilarious as I've been feeling for months, it would be the last crop sown. Fred, how nice you are to lean against! Grandmother Devereux," she mused dreamily, "said I was never made myself to be a hop-pole. After the muddle I've made of poor Jerry's affairs—— How wise you were, Fred! How full of prophetic instinct not to let me rummage about in yours!"

"Presently, Jill," said Fred, his eyes full of tender amusement, "my affairs may grow rather interesting."

"By that time," she murmured meekly, "I may have learnt not to be an absolute idiot. And, Fred, although being an ideal on a large scale must be heavenly for those who can stand it, for lesser people an ideal oughtn't to be too ideally ideal. It gets on a woman's nerves to be always pirouetting on tip-toe before an effigy of herself. It's too heavy a responsibility. Women aren't made for immense responsibilities, which will always be a stumbling-block in the path of their evolution. We can't take things in the light way you can. If

women ever do get into Parliament, unless they manage to unsex their consciences you'll have the half of them rolling on the floor of the House in the agonies of liver complaint before the first session is over. Even to look on at blatant idiocy affects women physically as well as mentally."

Fred smiled and yawned a little. He was very tired.

"Heart of my heart," he said, after a long look at her, "we'll thresh out the details of the amended ideal between us."

CHAPTER XXXVI

SOME months later Jill and Grandmother Devereux were sitting together in Jill's engaging wilderness of a drawing-room. Jill was diligently sewing, Mrs. Devereux as diligently looking on. Silence seemed as full of interest to the two friends as speech.

"How does Jerry really like the country?" said Jill at last.

"Immensely. He has a multitude of objects, and is wrapt up in prize bullocks. Cœlia Fontaine's husband seems to have been a most improving companion for Jerry. Plenty of ready money and a knowledge of anything costly enough in its rearing to deserve a prize," pursued the lady, in the same unprejudiced tone, "are such novelties in the county as to give Jerry a great deal of consequence. Jerry likes that."

"Prize bullocks," said Jill, after a pause which she spent in scraping her needle with a wry face down an uneven row of gathers—"prize bullocks are rather a queer cure for love, don't you think?"

"Better at any rate than drink," said Grandmother Devereux, with a snap of her splendid teeth.

"Not so touching, however," said Jill pensively.

"No," said her ancestress, "possibly not. You'd better finish that beef-tea, Jill; you're as thin as a whipping post."

"And Nell?" she inquired, her needle pointed dreamily heavenwards.

"Nell," said Mrs. Devereux cordially and lovingly, "Nell is

sweet and true and good. And her rational, unexacting belief in her husband is just what Jerry wants. By Nell's help Jerry won't disappoint us after all. There's not an hour of my life that I don't bless the Lord for sending that girl amongst us."

Jill's eyes were bright with tears, her lips trembled. She threw down her work, went and knelt in an odd soft sweet way before the old woman and seized her hands.

"I've told you every single thing. You know what an idiot I've been. But in spite of it—if you're going to care for Nell more than you do for me it—well—it will simply kill me."

The old woman's eyes shot out a flash of strange surprised rapture, and she laid her hand upon the girl's head.

"Child, child, do you care then?"

"Care! Oh, Grandmother Devereux—care!"

"Don't be afraid, Jill; you're very part and substance of my own heart."

Presently with restored serenity Jill was again busy with her ineffective needle. A gleam of grim humour awoke in Mrs. Devereux's eyes as she watched its strokes.

"To think," said Jill, "that I used once to pant for nothing less than to snatch fire from heaven, and now to find quite real joy in sewing frills. I wonder if this is a fixed state," she mused, with uplifted needle, "if I shall always find ecstatic delight in gathering frills for Fred's children?"

"I sincerely hope not, considering the atrocious way in which you're putting in those gathers. This is a phase due to enforced inaction with a smack of penance in it. Superstition runs in your blood—the popish taint inseparable from living in a contagious atmosphere. I hope presently that you may be fit for more rational pursuits. At the same time, to the day of your death you'll require the chastening rod. I hope the Lord may see fit to send you a large family."

Jill chuckled.

"It used," she said—"it used to be the devil."

"They have much the same corrective value."

Jill paused and bit her needle.

"I'd rather stick to the devil," she said presently. "Even now—even now I fear I could never stand thirteen children."

"Don't mock at the devil," said Mrs. Devereux solemnly. "The greatest loss ever sustained of the nation is the loss of an honest belief in its devil. So far there has arisen nothing to make up for this loss. A devil at least preserved us from this giggling ease in sinning, the scourge of our time. Even in sin," she added slowly, "there may be dignity. Robbed of that, it becomes fœtid, paltry, revolting, howsoever well gilded with wit it may happen to be. An insubordinate, lawless nature, with inordinate ambitions, wants a plain, straightforward deterrent. Age has now tempered me; but before that dreadful, inevitable calm fell," she said softly, "thanks be to God I could see Armageddon in every red sunset. That is when my conscience required the reminder; and sometimes—sometimes I have seen Paradise. By the way," she spoke again out of the hush—"by the way, Jill, from one or two of your remarks I gather that you imagine you have grown meek."

"One—one can do no more than try," said Jill, with a proud flush.

"My child, pray don't put on bruised reed airs. They don't become you. They make us all think that you need a tonic or a doctor, or sea air, and upset the household, and in the end may grow even mawkish, or melodramatic. Possibly people will begin to say that Fred's rapid progress has affected your reason."

"Oh, how horrid you can be!"

"Jill, you've got everything you've always longed for—power, strength, position——"

"Even if Fred died in honest obscurity——"

"I'd like to catch Fred dying in honest obscurity, much less living in it with you about. You've got everything—everything. And by the time Fred is fifty, with a name to conjure with, he'll think in his simple, noble mind that it's all been due to you; that without you he would have been overlooked. To slip into the counsels of such as Fred is a wonderful thing.

I'm glad, dear, I'm glad, and, thank God, I can be glad without either regret or envy. It seems as though all that you have gained is consoling me for all that I have lost."

"Grandmother Devereux, have you suffered much?"

"I have suffered greatly. No woman with a strong, untrammelled, rebellious heart but must suffer. It comes all in the day's work, and must be worn through, without any crying aloud in the market-place. But that is all behind me now," she said presently, with a lovely smile. "Before me I can see a wonderful light in the sky. From henceforth I shall rejoice."

THE END.

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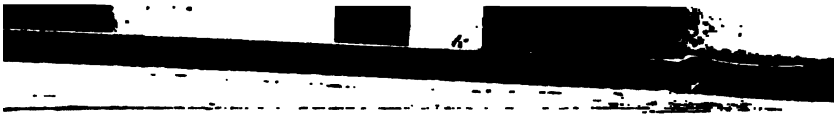
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